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GC NOVELS

賢者の弟子を名乗る賢者

She professed herself pupil of the wise man.

1

She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man

Volume 1

Contents:

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Postface

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Prologue

Virtual Reality. It had been half a century since that system was implemented. It was a technology that today's world economy could not do without.

Schooling was done by accessing dedicated terminals at home and then connecting the individual, through the internet, to a virtual reality to attend lessons. Without the possible risks that could be encountered during a student's commuting, and because the virtual educational institutions did not require any of the maintenance costs for the school building, today, physical schools were in the process of becoming extinct.

Similarly, with work, meeting clients was also done through virtual reality. Since electronic programs had been used for everything, the cost of paperwork also disappeared. Even when it came to a company's buildings—like its headquarters, for example—the renting and maintenance costs of a private server in the virtual reality was overwhelmingly cheaper than their real counterparts.

As everything outside of physical needs could be satisfied with virtual reality, the VR technology continued to develop by leaps and bounds.

Of course, there was no way that such a technology wouldn't be targeted by the game industry. Although its required equipment was still a little expensive, that technology grew so popular it wasn't uncommon for the general household to buy them as a way to celebrate a child's coming of age, for example.

It happened over different periods, but a number of VR games started being developed. Sakimori Kagami was also one such common youth who received a VR machine for his transition to adulthood.

Using his own machine, he did his job at home. For his lunch breaks, he would eat the food prepared by his mother. Working for a typical, small-to-medium firm that barely required overtime and had no need for commuting, Kagami spent his days without feeling any particular dissatisfaction.

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One day, a VRMMO-RPG[1] called『Ark Earth Online』appeared.

It began very quietly, with the Closed β starting and ending before anybody even knew it existed.

The reason that Sakimori Kagami became aware of such a minor game was because of a commercial that had aired late at night. It had neither sound nor video—it was merely the game's personal VR access code aired for 15 seconds.

Out of curiosity, when he started up his VR machine to take a look, a white virtual space with the title『Ark Earth Online』appeared around him. The only

other things were two lines:

Begin Open β.

Download.

Interested by that simplistic approach, that did not try to butter him up, he touched the *Download* text. Then, after choosing "yes", the installation process began. Going by the only clues given at the moment, with those characters written in a fairly common font and floating around a world of pure white, he had absolutely no idea what kind of graphics or world the game would present.

Yet, Kagami was somewhat charmed by that. Although he could hardly explain it, if anything, he felt as if something was compelling him to install the game.

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The installation took roughly fifteen minutes. When he immediately tried to activate it, what appeared was a title screen that looked almost like reality.

Thus began Sakimori Kagami's days of addiction to『Ark Earth Online』.

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Four years had passed since the Open β had finished. News and advertisement of the game were almost non-existent in gaming magazines or even the internet, but its large player base had already approached, in size, to that of the online games from major corporations. On the contrary, considering how many people were playing the game, it could be said that it was rather strange how Ark Earth Online wasn't appearing on the internet.

The game itself had a typical fantasy setting, but because of its overwhelming degree of freedom, it was hugely popular. Still, as an online game, it had one extremely mysterious point about it:

Its management.

In the four years that the game had been out, there were only two updates, and because there was no official home page, no one knew about its management policy and even the developer's name was an incognita.

That said, it was still an extremely attractive game; rather, there were people who even thought that such a laissez faire attitude from the managers was the right idea, one that opened a whole range of opportunities for the players. And above all, what seemed more important than anything was its lack of bugs.

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The character that Kagami played was an old magician that overflowed with dignity. With white hair and a white beard that brought to mind a veteran magician, what Kagami spent a day creating was a character with incredible presence. The avatar's name was chosen from two of his favorite fictional wizards: one was the principal of a magician's school that appeared in a world-wide famous movie, while the other was a wizard from an adventure film about a ring.

Dunbalf was the character's name. His class, the Summoning Expert. In the Open β he had chosen the Sorcery Expert, but he had no idea how he was supposed to learn sorcery. No matter how many enemies he defeated he couldn't learn sorcery, and there was nothing like a tutorial or a manual to fix that problem.

Although it was a ridiculous game that left the person completely on their own after suddenly dropping them into the world, it was fun searching for one's own playstyle, so the players were completely drawn in.

Even so, no matter how hard he had searched, he couldn't figure out how to learn sorcery.

A Summoning Expert gained summons through defeating spirit-type enemies and forming a contract with them, or through actions like clearing class-specific quests. The latter option was much harder to learn, but since a small part of its methods was already available on bulletin boards, Kagami had the basic ideas of what he had to do.

Of course, because of the lack of explanations for the game, there was a lot of grumbling amongst players, but it was discovered that the game had a system where, if one passed very strict conditions, they could even create a country, so their passion went strongly in that direction.

Becoming a king, developing a town and building an army. Invading neighbouring countries, building defensive forts, hiring mercenaries, etc.; towards the ability to do things that they had only ever seen in fiction before, the players went mad with enthusiasm.

Ambitious players who founded nations, players who looked up to those founders and followed them, adventurers who loved freedom, people who established secret societies, as well as merchants, mercenaries and, on top of all that, even assassins; because of such a wide range of playstyles available for their own enjoyment, the players' dissatisfaction eventually died down.

Moreover, the degree of freedom was not limited to just that. For example, despite the fact that, including legendary-class items, there was already a great variety of weapons, armors, potions and others, with some ingenuity the players were able to create completely new items. It was possible to produce not only legendary-grade items, but things that even surpassed that class. It reached a point that people began saying that there was nothing you could do in reality that you couldn't do in the game.

Some players who delved deeply into enjoying blacksmithing became known by all players, and even a single sword of theirs could be sold for millions. Others, who managed to master woodworking, developed building construction techniques that allowed them to create castles. People obsessed with digging holes found hot springs, and were now managers of massive onsen resorts. There were even those who devised their own sword techniques and opened a dojo to teach them.

What kind of skills were there? How far could they go with their creativity?

There were those who freely used skills to develop new sports, people who realised their dreams of becoming pirates, people who risked themselves by

collecting information from around the continent and becoming information brokers. Attempting a great number of things, the players were successful in every single one of them—even the most ridiculous ideas worked.

Amongst those players were also people who formed skill lists by organising the absolutely great number of known skills. They would meet with each player and ask about the particular details of the techniques they had developed, collecting everything in a book. The skills encyclopedia published by them became a massive best-seller, earning a fortune for its creators.

In fact, Dunbalf was also a famous person who had developed a number of unique techniques. One of them was a technique he created through trial and error, designed to make up for the weak points of those who acted in the rearguard. It was the development of a secondary job, called as "Second Class" by the players. Dunbalf's main class was the Summoning Expert, while his other job was a close-quarters specialist of the Expert classes, the Xian Expert. By going through training such as sitting under waterfalls and hanging upside down from trees for an entire day, a Xian Expert could learn their skills.

Incidentally, the way for a Sorcery Expert to obtain their skills was discovered little by little in the month since game officially began; the players were supposed to place a catalyst on a piece of paper with a magic circle drawn on it, and then use the only skill that Sorcery Experts started with, the【Sorcery: Flame】, to burn it up.

Four years after the start of such a miraculous game, Kagami had become a part of the Nine Sages, a group that was considered one of the pillars of a certain country.

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One day, Kagami had gone off to suppress monsters that had appeared near the border of the nation he belonged to. That type of subjugation mission was very common, and other members of his nation took turns to do it. And it was now Kagami's turn.

Leaving the tower he used as his main base, Kagami listlessly headed towards the national borders when, suddenly, he heard a call from the real world and his sister's shrill voice, indicating it was dinner time.

After eating, the man dived back into the virtual reality. Immediately, he noticed that there was a message for him. Checking its contents, Kagami found out that the online cash he had bought for Ark Earth Online was about to expire.

Just like other online games, Ark Earth Online also had a cash shop. However, the things sold there were just minor items to support one's gameplay.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that, amongst the cash shop items, there was a classic product that all players had bought: the『Vanity Case』. Each one was sold for ¥500 and allowed the player to reset their avatar's

appearance; the reason it sold really well was because of the abundance of changeable options for the character.

At the start of the game, the number of appearance parts one could select for free was in the thousands, but with the Vanity Case it numbered in the tens of thousands. It was basically already common sense that, first of all, the player would log in with a random character appearance and then use a Vanity Case to setup a new look for that avatar, one that would actually suit their tastes.

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Besides the Vanity Case, there was another classic item, the『Floating Continent』. It was roughly the size of a 100 meter track field, and was considered a convenient item because a player could do most activities on it. In addition, since it was able to travel by flying through the air, people used it as a vehicle that could move while ignoring the terrain.

The cost of a『Floating Continent』was ¥2000. As the online cash could only be bought in multiples of ¥1000, after deducting the costs for the case and the continent, Kagami had been left with ¥500 that were now about to expire. It was just a mere ¥500 from four years ago so, as one would expect, he didn't have much lingering attachment to it. Still, because he felt—out of stinginess, perhaps—that it would be a waste to let the money disappear, he opened up the cash shop menu.

For crafting-related items, there was a craftsman room complete with high class production equipment, priced at ¥1000. Then, in the category that included the Floating Continent, there were other topography-related items that could be placed on that flying land, like buildings and lakes, for example; each being sold for ¥2000. Finally, to complete the cash shop line-up, there was the『Vanity Case』.

In the end, the only thing he could buy was the case. In addition, even if someone had the desire to obtain just a single Vanity Case, they were forced to buy the minimum of ¥1000 in online credit. That was the harsh reality of the world of adults.

Since it would just be a waste at that rate, Kagami bought a Vanity Case in the end. As a result, his VR money balance became 0.

He then logged into the game to finish his subjugation mission. Using his bracelet-type terminal, he activated the item menu. There, Kagami found a small, lacquered box—the Vanity Case he had just purchased. It had already been four years since he had last used one.

In those days he was completely obsessed about whether or not he could create his ideal male avatar, and so he remembered nothing about the other appearance parts that were available.

Now, Kagami found himself feeling a little curious about them, so he used the Vanity Case and was brought to the avatar creation page, a screen he had

not seen since four fears ago.

The parts one could choose from were separated into categories, such as the group that defined the “impression a character could give to others,” that included characteristics like “lively”, “reserved”, “strong-willed”, “cowardly” and many others. Additionally, there was even a category for the “atmosphere” or “presence” expressed by the avatar, like “mysterious”, “solemn”, “gloomy”, “bright”, etc. To help the player, every category and characteristic could be found through searches in the menu.

What Kagami felt from having a skim through the list was that, as expected, his current avatar Dunbalf was simply the greatest.

There was probably nothing greater than that avatar. After all, it was something created from his very ideal of what a man was supposed to be. Whilst gazing on in satisfaction at the work of art he had created, a word in the corner of Kagami’s eye caught his attention:

Male

It was the word that stated the avatar’s sex.

And suddenly, a thought rushed through his mind. His ideal male image had already been perfectly created, right? Then, what about his ideal *female* image?

He changed the sex from male to female, and Dunbalf became a girl.

On the spot, a slight awkward feeling welled up in his chest. Even though it was a game, staring straight at a girl’s figure gave him this difficult to describe sense of shame.

Whilst firmly suppressing that shame… or rather, with a little bit of arousal still affecting him, he chose the character parts.

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Just how long had passed since he began creating his ideal female? By the time Kagami finished the avatar exactly as he had desired and turned to gazing at it with a smirk, he was already being called for breakfast.

When he looked at the time, it already indicated 9 in the morning.

Not even a second later, he was assaulted by an intense feeling of sleepiness. As he tried to touch the logout button, the world went dark, and Kagami’s consciousness promptly left him.

Chapter 1

Ahh, that's right, I ended up falling asleep before logging out.

After sorting out the situation in his head, Kagami remembered that he had fallen asleep after pulling an all nighter, right when he was being called for breakfast. Finally awake, he looked up at the sky while pinching his forehead.

He couldn't tell how long he had slept. However, judging by the fact that he had not been awoken by his young sister, it probably meant that his sleep did not last too long.

After squeezing his eyes shut to clear away the drowsiness that affected his mind, when Kagami's eyes reopened he found himself in the dead centre of a grassy plain surrounded by a forest. Here and there, the place was dotted with nameless flowers, and in the distance, peeking through the gaps of the swaying treetops, he could see a splendorous mountain range. Then, between the mountains over there, he spotted a number of towers, their silver shine faintly reaching his eyes.

Before such a familiar scenery of the game, Kagami stood stock still and, in order to sort out the questions that had appeared in his head, he placed a hand to his chin, listlessly pondering his current situation.

First of all, "Falling asleep in-game" was a famous term among online gamers. It referred to falling asleep whilst in-game and having your avatar stand still without reacting to anything. However, the VR system was designed so that it would automatically shut down the system when the person fell asleep. Not only that, but it would even cut off the equipment from its power source, so it was fundamentally impossible to wake up inside the game.

And yet, no matter how one looked at them, the towers sitting among the mountains were the『Silver Linked Towers』. Since each of them were used as a base by a respective member of the Nine Sages, there was no way that Kagami would mistake those towers for anything else.

The first thing he suspected was a bug in the game. At that time, however, his trail of thought was stopped right when it reached the point of *"Well, rare things do indeed happen sometimes."* Why? Because there was one more baffling occurrence after all. If he were to compare those two points, the second one was much more important.

It was that he could smell things. Every time the wind blew, a grassy scent tickled his nose and he felt a strange sense of discomfort.

The developed VR technology could reproduce, within its own capacity, the sense of touch, but the senses of taste and smell weren't developed to a practical level yet. Despite that, when Kagami inhaled through his nose, his brain was clearly telling him that there was a scent. That situation was truly incomprehensible.

So, in an attempt to verify that mystery, he tore off some of the grass that was near his feet and, when he began to chew on it, a bitter and astringent

taste spread through all of his mouth. Without standing it, he spat the grass out along with a large amount of saliva, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand in the process. The taste felt annoyingly intense, and even his own saliva was meticulously reproduced.

Unable to understand how the herbivores could ever stand that kind of "food", he turned his sight down towards a clump of bushes, noticing that those plants seemed fairly closer to his eyes than they should usually be. But it was right then that something happened. All of a sudden, from within the forest, came a war cry accompanied by a rumbling in the ground. Immediately, the high-pitched sounds of metal rubbing against metal resounded through the air like shockwaves.

Those were sounds very familiar to him.

"*Ah, I remember now,*" thought Kagami. He just recalled that he had come out to subjugate the group of monsters that had in the vicinity of the nation's borders. Had somebody been unluckily enough to run across them? Or maybe someone else went to defeat the monsters in his stead…

Thinking the second option would be unlikely to happen, he broke into a run, a bitter smile appearing on his face. When he finally crossed the forest, Kagami found himself in another grassy plain. There, a knight that proudly hoisted a very familiar national emblem was cutting down some small creatures; similar to a child in size, those beings had blue skin and both their nose and ears were pointed. However, in the next instant, two—or rather, three of the blue creatures gathered together, each holding a dully gleaming knife in one hand, and attacked that knight. Currently, that place was, without a doubt, a battlefield.

Silver and blue completely covered the plains. Clad in armor that shone almost like a mirror, the knights who kept raising a battle cry as they charged against their enemies were known as the Magic Clothed Knights, elite members of a certain nation—the same one that the Nine Sages were associated with: the Kingdom of Arkite. Now, the enemy they were fighting against? A very common kind of monster: the goblin.

Finding such a scene in front of him, Kagami realised he had slept for a really long time; because he was much too late in doing his job, the Kingdom's knights were dispatched.

【Summoning: Dark Knight】

After activating his ability, a darkly shining hole opened up on the ground, covering some of the bushes that were there. A second later, a large knight gradually rose from it: fully covered in a jet black armor that could easily instill shivers down someone's spine, the entirety of that being's body was spouting what appeared to be blackish flames, their misshapen form swaying ominously. Instead of a face, it just had two red gleaming lights for eyes, both floating in a space painted in complete darkness.

Giving off a clearly different presence than everyone else there, that black knight had suddenly appeared in the middle of the battlefield between the knights and goblins. After they stopped in their tracks due to that unknown

being appearing, as if trying to threaten it, the goblins released sharp squeaking sounds from their mouths. And it was right then that Kagami's sense of discomfort was renewed.

The goblins should not have been programmed to do something like that.

The oft killed goblins were designed to always act like brave and daring monsters; or, if one were to put it like it really was, they were supposed to be monsters that didn't know their place and would, in the end, gracefully jump to their own deaths. However, what Kagami saw before his eyes was, no matter how one looked at it, goblins making a fuss due to what seemed to be "fear".

And yet, concluding that it would be useless even if he were to contemplate it right now, he ordered his Dark Knight to clean them up.

In an instant, the place exploded into a hellish massacre. The black greatsword cut through the air, creating a windstorm. Each time its blade was casually swung down, five or six goblins would release a deathcry and have their bodies scattered into the surroundings, reduced to mere lumps of meat.

Gradually, the goblins' threatening cries changed into shrieks filled with despair and they began running to escape from that hell; a hopeless endeavour, as the Dark Knight who had been ordered to clean them up did not show a single grain of mercy.

Without even time to scream at the black mass that quickly closed the distance between them, a number of unlucky goblins were sent flying through the air, torn to shreds.

The surrounding goblins who saw that happening right before them couldn't even take the bare minimum measures needed for self-defence and, from a single swing of the broadsword, fell on the ground, their eyes devoid of life as their bodily fluids and innards were scattered all over the place.

Having eradicated the monsters in the immediate area, the Dark Knight now seized a group that included a goblin clad in armor, its physique a size larger than the others.

While screaming out orders with some impatience mixed within its voice, that heavily armored goblin kept giving off dull metallic sounds as it moved; although it was slow because of the armor weight, it was possible to see that the goblin had quite a bit of stamina. A few of the goblins who were particularly clever—for goblins—had made serious use of their entire brain to realise that being around the armored one would increase their survival rate, and gathered around it.

However, with the Dark Knight who was bursting with bloodlust as their opponent, it was nothing but an act of stupidity. If they had wanted to survive, there was no option but to run in the opposite direction of those who were confronting the knight.

Despite that, the Dark Knight wouldn't even allow them to reach that silver lining. The black killer's blade chased after them, and when faced with a vision of absolute death, the herd of monsters descended into terror, forgetting everything about the meaning behind working as a group. After reaching that

point, the goblins became nothing more than lone, helpless prey to their foe.

It all just happened in an instant. Without even being able to understand what was happening, the goblins dyed the earth with their dark red blood.

Just as it had been ordered, the Dark Knight cleaned up all the goblins in the area and turned them into silent husks, fulfilling the contract it was bound to. The massacre had taken no more than two or three minutes, but the plains were now intensely dyed with the monsters' blood. As a gentle breeze caressed the place, the entire scenery that could be seen there would easily evoke, within anyone's mind, the picture of a fierce slaughter that had just been finished. Of the two colors that were dividing their place in the grasslands, the blue was lying on the darkened ground, while the silver had grouped together in a formation, vigilant against the Dark Knight.

There were perhaps a hundred goblin corpses on the ground. After giving a casual glance at those bodies to confirm that his job was done, Dunbalf dismissed his knight.

And then, his mind was once again troubled by the many things he had witnessed until now. There was smell and taste, as well as goblins that took actions he had never seen before. He reached only one conclusion:

That was the third game update.

It seemed far-fetched to suddenly think that both smell and taste, that were still being researched worldwide, could be reproduced to such an extent, but what was happening right now was that all his five senses were being conveyed to his whole body. Although it was weird that such a cutting edge technology had been first used in a game, it was also a fact that he had no other way to appropriately explain his current situation.

As expected of the 『*Ark Earth Online*』 *staff*. Dunbalf concluded that the reason his machine hadn't shut down—despite him falling asleep online—was most probably because of the version update.

When he told himself that, Dunbalf noticed the sound of chafing metal approaching.

Its source was none other than the band of knights. On their shields was emblazoned the symbol of the 『Kingdom of Arkite』, a coat of arms representing a great tree and a moon.

They were the Magic Clothed Knights of Arkite and could easily be recognized from their characteristic armor and shield. The mirror-like armor reflected the light and adapted itself into the surroundings, while the shield boasted strong defence against abilities or breath attacks released by monsters.

The man who appeared to be the leader of those elite knights stopped his subordinates with a hand signal, then took a step forward. His slicked back hair was silver-grey with a few streaks of white mixed here and there, and on his finely chiseled face ran a slanted scar, a proof of his long service in the military. Atop his armor was what was probably the symbol of the commander; a red mantle. Although he wasn't on the same level as Dunbalf, he still looked like a

very refined, handsome man. And yet, Dunbalf himself had no memory of that face; somewhat weird, considering that, as one of the top members of his country, he knew the faces of everyone who served as commanders in the Kingdom's elite units.

"About that black armored knight from before... I'm assuming it was a technique belonging to the controller class arts. Was that your doing, young lady? Would it be all right for me to consider you as our reinforcements?"

The man she believed was the commanding officer started a conversation. However, Dunbalf didn't realise that it was being directed at him. After all, there was something obviously wrong within the commander's words.

"Then who is he speaking to?" wondered Dunbalf, as he turned his head to check the surroundings. And when he did, he noticed one of the goblin corpses shaking violently—immediately, something jumped out from under it and escaped towards the forest.

"Humpf, so there was… a… survivor...?"

The exact moment those words left his mouth, he felt that two things were going incredibly wrong there. The first was that the survivor's characteristics were obviously different to a goblin's.

"What… is this?"

As for the second one, it was the sound of that lovely, bell-like voice.

Taking a look at his own figure that was being reflected in the commander's mirror-like armor, Dunbalf stood in a daze at what he was just witnessing before his very eyes.

Clear Mirror Armor. That was the name given to the official equipment of the Arkite Kingdom's Order of the Magic Clothed Knights. Its surface, that reflected light just like any other mirror, could even be used as the very thing itself. Now seeing his own form reflected there, Dunbalf first moved his right hand, and then his left.

When he did, without an off beat, the young girl reflected in the knight's armor copied his movements. Or rather, it was already beyond the realm of simply copying; Dunbalf and the girl were one and the same.

In addition, that girl wasn't unfamiliar to him.

Silver hair that reached around the hips, strong-willed, azure eyes that were slanted upwards, slightly reddened cheeks and a small nose; everything together fitting perfectly on an innocent, cherubic face. The clothing or equipment Dunbalf had been wearing was still the same, though. Only the insides—or, in this case, the person wearing them—had clearly changed.

Indeed, what lay inside those clothes was the very figure of his ideal girl; the same girl he had created with the『Vanity Case』.

Chapter 2

"How did this happen?" he wondered, as his mind searched through his memory at full throttle to recall what had happened before he fell asleep. While that was happening, the Knight Commander was at a loss regarding the distracted girl.

Then, at that moment, a number of his subordinates came over and reported to him. It was related to the monster that had jumped out from beneath the goblins' bodies. Apparently, they had managed to injury it, but it moved so fast they were unable to bring the monster down.

As the commander gave the instructions to split his group into a search party and a pursuit team, the young girl stared fixedly at her new, smaller hands.

What was reflected on the surface of the armor was exactly the ideal girl he had created earlier.

Just what was the meaning of that? Trying to pull the reason from the well of his memories, Kagami remembered that, indeed, he had produced that figure in the avatar creation page, but he shouldn't have actually confirmed the change.

He had cancelled it, and then logged out…

That was as far as his memories brought him. Maybe, just a little bit before he'd logged out. Something was telling him that, in fact, he had fallen asleep before leaving the game—no, even earlier than that, Kagami felt it happened before he had even pushed the "cancel" button.

Although he tried his best to wring out from his memories the circumstances of that exact moment, everything that happened after he heard the call for breakfast seemed completely clouded.

While reaching that point, something occurred to him. He immediately activated his bracelet-like terminal and opened the status window from the menu; there, information about his avatar was displayed in a column.

His name was Dunbalf Gandadore. In addition, the window displayed his class, "Summoning Expert", the nation he belonged to and then his registered base of operations. His magical power was a cut above the rest, but his physical attributes were on par to—if not just a little bit higher than—the common Expert. That deficiency was supplemented by his gear values.

From a glance, everything seemed to be working without any problems in particular. It wasn't that he logged into a different avatar, nor that his avatar was gone. The information displayed before him was the same status of Dunbalf, the character he had spent four years working on.

Subsequently, after moving to the next page of the menu, the young girl dropped her shoulders and hung her head down, having finally lost all her hope.

The gear specially made for the Sages was lined up there. Every single piece of that exquisite equipment had been bestowed to him by the King of Arkite, an act done to congratulate Dunbalf for his ascension to the position of Elder, head of one of the Silver Linked Towers. Those items were uniquely crafted by renowned, first-class craftsmen players, and only Dunbalf possessed those them.

However, what brought Kagami to despair wasn't the items lined up there, but the avatar being displayed beside them—the girl he had created was showcased in the screen, wearing all that equipment. *Dunbalf* was the one who should have been there, in all his handsome, austere glory; not that little girl.

Wondering what could have possibly happened, the girl grabbed the lower hem of her robe and, rolling it upwards, tried stripping. When Kagami did it, at the same time, the status word in the corresponding equipment slot turned to "None".

With the robe hanging idly in one of "his" hands, as he looked down to check "his" exposed body, the supple, silver hair possessed by the girl gently danced around while coiling around her white skin.

Indeed, a snow-white, nearly transparent skin. Plus small mounds that swelled from her chest, just large enough to peek through her little, cupped hands. Finally, a modest butt with two well-shaped legs stretching out from under it. Without a doubt, the girl was the materialization of Kagami's ideal, the one he had created with the『Vanity Case』.

“OOOOIII! OIOIOI! What are you doing!?”

When the commander had just finished giving instructions to his subordinates, with astonishment in his voice, he instantly called out to the girl, whose figure had become naked before he knew it. A moment later, he grabbed his red mantle in a mad rush and used it to cover and hide the young girl’s body. All of the surrounding knights had been focusing their gazes on her

immodest appearance, but now, with their self-restraint of steel kicking in, they all averted their faces and stayed silent.

"Honestly, if you're a woman, little lady, then you shouldn't be revealing your skin like that. We knights are all faithfully honest so there shouldn't be a problem, but in this world there are people with whom you can't let your guard down, you know."

Was there really a need for such an overreaction? So wondered the girl while finding herself amazed that all those knights could actually be players, considering how they had just reacted.

Reasonably famous and powerful players could bring along attendant NPCs to walk with them. The girl had thought that the knights around her were the commander's servants, but it seemed like she had been wrong. After all, NPCs shouldn't have been able to give those kinds of reactions.

She didn't really want to believe nor admit it, but as truly reluctant as she was, the girl decided to accept her current situation. How, or what she had messed up, the girl didn't know. But the fact was that she had apparently confirmed the avatar reset.

Most probably, the version update had something to do with it. Having reached that conclusion, she thought about buying another『Vanity Case』. However, even though it was only ¥500, there was no other choice but to spend yet another ¥1000. And she frowned at that prospect.

Wriggling about under the mantle, the girl put her robe back on, and after checking the status menu again, she found that the avatar being displayed there returned to wearing the robe as well.

"Is that an Operator's Bracelet? So you were actually an adventurer, weren't you, young lady?"

While returning his mantle to its proper location, the commander muttered those words as he looked at the girl's arm.

An Operator's Bracelet. Now that was a strange term to her. Following the knight's gaze, there was no mistake that he was referring to her terminal. However, there was no need for him to ask about it: every player in the game had one of those bracelets. In addition, why would he use something like "adventurer" instead of "player"? As the weirdness of that situation continued to intensify, the doubts in the girl's mind only increased.

"Well, if I am asked whether or not I am an adventurer, I suppose the answer should be yes."

She may not have understood it, but the girl still answered affirmatively. *In a voice she just couldn't get used to*. Hearing her usual manner of speech[2] being used by a voice whose timbre sounded simply *too* lovely, an indescribable feeling welled up within her heart.

Everything, from her choice of words and overall pattern of speech, came from when she had decided to play as Dunbalf in the game, right when it had officially began. She thought that, indeed, there was a need to use a certain tone to match the speaker's dignified appearance, so she began roleplaying

like that.

And now, having gone through four years of speaking with the same kind of speech, she was already used to employing it while logged in; as a result, it came naturally out of the girl's mouth. Growing accustomed was truly a frightening thing; she had been so concentrated on unveiling the mysteries of the world that, even after taking the form of a little girl, she felt an inexplicable sense of discomfort just by thinking of trying to change how she had always spoken. As a result, there was no way she could do that all of a sudden. Still, because there was no particular problem with using that tone, she quickly abandoned the idea to switch her speech pattern.

"I see, so you were an adventurer. I'm grateful to receive the assistance of such a powerful one like you. However, about that black knight from earlier... I've never seen something that looked like it before; what kind of technique was that?"

Despite accepting the girl's words, the commander was apparently curious about her strength. In particular, he was interested in the identity of the black knight clad in an ominous aura, a clear mismatch with the girl's lovely appearance.

"Pardon me, but I do not quite get what you mean. As you can see, this is just a summoning skill."

While speaking, the girl activated【Summoning: Dark Knight】, and by her side appeared once again the black knight. While the other knights were shaken by the overwhelming pressure being released by it, the commander alone gazed at the summon with deep fascination.

"Summoning… how splendid. I see, an Armor Spirit is it? That's pretty rare."

Probably comparing the Dark Knight against what he knew, the commander's thoughtful expression transformed completely when he realized how magnificent that summon was, his degree of astonishment now doubled or tripled.

Among the spirits used by Summoning Experts, for example, there were those that dwelled in man-made creations, called Artificial Spirits, and those that were naturally found in the world, the Primordial Spirits.

Primordial Spirits were the stronger of the two, but because the Artificial ones lived within created objects, they were easier to handle and tame.

Spirits that dwelled in armor that had been used by individuals who only battled for their own benefit were called『Dark Knights』; conversely, armor whose owners had fought to protect others were possessed by spirits called『Holy Knights』.

Although Armor Spirits were classified as lower class summons, the Dark Knights had the quality of being easy to use and consequently, through their continued deployment, could become fighters that rivalled even high class summons. Having said that, the girl thought the commander seemed rather weird for calling the Armor Spirit Summon, something so basic to Summoning

Experts, as “rare”; but certainly, it was a fact that, when compared with the past, the current days saw a great decline in Summoning Experts who used such a low class summon. That’s why she understood that, indeed, there was a reason for saying the technique was rare.

“Still, just when were you sent out on a request? Lately monster herds like these have been frequently appearing, so I’m grateful for you, but I would have liked to be informed in advance of your help.”

Muttered the commander, a small grumble making itself apparent in his speech. And yet, the expression on his face looked quite happy; that was just how busy he had been when dealing with the monsters. What caught the girl’s attention, however, was a *certain something* he had said.

First of all, because the Nine Sages had been taking turns exterminating them, the herd of monsters were being dealt with just fine. Second of all, they weren’t actually appearing all that frequently. The monster herds attacked with a frequency that was enough to let each Sage have their turn only once every few months.

“Hmmm, do they not appear only once or, at most, twice a month? I do not believe that it is a huge number.”

Despite saying that, the girl felt there was something wrong about that situation. There might have existed somebody who thought that once every month was too much, but what made her feel out of place there wasn’t that; it was something much more fundamental, like there was some kind of basic difference between herself and the knight commander.

“Once a month, huh? If it were ten years ago, then you might have been right, but these days we get ordered to suppress them at least three times a month.”

While showing a—rather child-like—expression of disappointment after comparing his own build with the Dark Knight’s, the commander nonchalantly replied.

“Did you just say… *ten years ago*?”

The words she had unconsciously repeated were, without a doubt, part of the main problem that was causing the feeling of discomfort within her.

“Young lady, you’re an adventurer but you haven’t heard of it, huh? It’s about the war with the monsters that had rained from the sky ten years ago, the Three God-doms Defensive Battle. Since that time, monster appearances had a sharp increase and have nearly doubled now.”

“*Three God-doms Defensive Battle*, you say… It does not sound familiar to me.”

“You don’t know about it? Hmmm, well, ten years ago you would’ve been two or three years old I guess, so I suppose this is not unreasonable.”

So said the man. However, Ark Earth Online’s in-game clock ran at the same rate as a clock in the real-world, meaning that ten years ago *not even the Closed β of the game would have existed.*

She then manipulated her bracelet and opened the usual menu. Looking like something that came directly out of sci-fi anime and films, that floating display could only be seen by the owner themselves. To the other people, they would only see that person poking at the air.

The commander merely waited silently as he observed the girl operating her menu, a difficult expression showing on her face.

Selecting the option to display the game's chronology in the menu, the troubled girl did not pay attention to any historical details written there in particular. Instead, there was just only one thing that made her feel at a complete loss for words: a sequence of numerical characters within the description of the earliest historical event.

〖*Year 2146 of the Arks Calendar, April 23rd: The Second Prince of the Kingdom of Millston was born. He was named "Atolzade."*〗

Her state of shock wasn't caused by the contents of the event per se, but actually by **the year** indicated there. Panicking, when she checked the present time that was displayed in the upper-right corner of the page, she found it marked as "Year 2146 of the Arks Calendar, May 12th, 3:12PM."

"There is something I wish to confirm; what year, month and date is it?"

"Right now? We're in the 12th of May, 2146."

That answer proved that the terminal's date was not broken.

The game had begun in the Year 2112 of the Arks Calendar. No matter how one thought about it, that situation was strange. Provided that the ingame time still ran in sync with the real world's clock, "thirty years" had passed for the girl. Moreover, after taking just a little time to re-examine the chronology table, she found that it was filled with events that she had no memory of; incidentally, as the commander had mentioned, ten years ago on the 24th of June 2136, there really was the "Outbreak of the Three God-doms Defensive Battle".

Immediately, the girl grabbed a bunch of her own silver hair and brought it to her nose. When she did, a faint and sweet, girly-like fragrance that resembled vanilla entered through her nostrils. Trying to place that hair in her mouth, she found that it had no taste, and that both her tongue and lips could finely perceive each individual strand.

From what she remembered, the simulation of all five senses with the VR technology was still in the research stage. Having said that, within its own capacity, the technology was able to reproduce some of those senses, but for the sense of touch, for example, the person could only recognize if they have touched something or not. If there had been really a version update where one's virtual senses could reach such a fine degree of detail—like what the girl was experiencing now—then, without a doubt, it would be recorded in the chronology page. And in fact, the two previous updates had been recorded there. However, there was not a single mention of the version update that was supposed to have happened just yesterday; even after skimming through the past entries, she could only find the two updates that were already known to her.

"*Does this mean that it was not a new version that caused all of this?*" pondered the girl as anxiety welled up within her. She was able to perfectly feel the taste of grass and the smells in the air, so what could possibly be the meaning of that?

Strictly speaking, her present situation was simply too unrealistic, but with how she could actually use her five senses there, it felt all *too realistic*.

By chance, a sudden hypothesis came to her mind; one that was simply, absolutely impossible.

Closing the menu and raising her face, she met eyes with the knight commander, who looked bewildered by her eccentric behaviour.

"Aahhh… oh yes, speaking of which we haven't introduced ourselves yet, have we? I'm Graia. Graia Astol. I'm serving as the First Squad Captain of the Arkite Kingdom's Magic Clothed Knights."

Introducing himself almost reflexively, Commander Graia bowed to the girl in a display of respect.

"And by the way, from what I have seen, you are quite the skilful Expert, young lady. But if you're fine with it, would you grant me the honor of knowing your name?"

After finishing his bow and raising his head again, Graia continued speaking and, with great interest, asked the girl a question.

Then, right there, something felt out of place to her.

Graia's actions seemed extremely natural. Naming himself upon his first meeting with someone; becoming interested in the other party and asking for their name. But things were different within the game. It was common sense for one to inspect the other person and see that individual's name floating above their head. As such, it was possible to know each other's names without going out of one's way to ask or tell them.

And yet, Graia named himself. On top of that, he was asking for the name of someone who, most probably, could not be merely classified as a "skilful Expert"; he was one of the Nine Sages of the Kingdom of Arkite, Dunbalf.

It wasn't conceit, but she thought that there was no way that an elite member of the Kingdom would not know about her avatar's name. There was something clearly unnatural about that.

"Would you not know if you simply inspected me?"

With a certain hypothesis passing through her mind, the girl asked a question in return just to test it.

"Hmmm… I'm sure that someone with your level of skill should be quite famous, young lady. However, pardon my ignorance, but I do not know you. Excuse me. Is there anyone here that knows her?"

At the commander's question, everybody shook their heads, indicating that they had never seen the girl before.

"Hmm… I... see…"

She had once heard that there were some players who felt it was disrespectful to inspect an individual's status without permission. Nonetheless, if one were to tell them to take a look, then even those players would probably inspect the person in question. Although her appearance had gone through a complete change, inspecting the girl in front of them would make them realize that she was one of the most important individuals of the Kingdom: Dunbalf.

In spite of that, even with the great number of people there, no one knew who she was.

The hypothesis she had was whether those knights could use "Inspect" or not. And what came from their responses was a certain sense of reality.

Those she was dealing with didn't know what was common sense among players. That line of thinking was actually way off; to begin with, she might even have the need to revise her thoughts, removing anything related to **players**. As she pondered that, the girl placed her hand on her chin and began an indistinct mumble.

With the information she had gathered as the basis, she built her hypothesis up. Consequently, yet another impossible thought surfaced and her theory began to gradually take form.

"Really, I'm truly sorry. We're just a group of people who has no redeeming features outside of our own swordsmanship, you see? So we really aren't that knowledgeable about adventurers."

Albeit he actually guessed it wrong, Graia had wondered if the girl's silence was a result of the shock of not being recognized, so he tried to patch things up with her; even the other knights had apologetic expressions on their faces. *Noticing the strong will displayed by them, and yet recognizing that they weren't players*. That was enough basis for her theory.

The five senses working true to reality. Individuals who couldn't be categorized as either NPCs or players. With that in mind, she realized it was impossible for VR to reproduce her current situation, so she abandoned her original theory that everything had been caused by a version update.

And as she dropped that conjecture, the explanation that seemed more like an urban legend became impossible to leave her mind. Even if she were to completely reject it, telling herself that there was no way it could be true, the girl's current situation made it so that she couldn't completely deny that "impossible" theory.

Yes, she was in a real world. It was truly a ridiculous assumption. However, it was also certainly true that she had nothing to refute it with.

At that moment, she recalled something that could prove that she was a game. It was the command to close the game: the logout.

(Looks like I could not think straight at all.)

While mocking herself, she opened the "System" entry on her main menu and chose to log out… or at least she tried to. To no avail. Far from succeeding, the "System" menu itself had disappeared. To make matters worse, even the forced shutdown code—originally prepared for game freezing situations—was

not working.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that such an occurrence was a huge, decisive blow for the "impossible" hypothesis.

Then, in that case, was that (real) world the same one as the game world she knew?

"Do you know who Dunbalf is?"

To determine that, she asked a question about herself, or rather, someone who should have existed in the past of that world.

"But of course! There's probably no one in this country who doesn't know about Dunbalf-sama."

So replied Graia, with some hint of pride showing on his face. When he followed up by asking, "Right, everyone?" all the other knights gave large nods as if it was a natural response.

"I see. So you do know of him."

From their reply, she established that a person named Dunbalf existed, or at least had existed in the past. Next, she had to find out whether they were talking about herself or just a completely different person who had the same name.

"Then, do you know what kind of person he is?"

Upon hearing that question, Graia tilted his head.

"What kind of person? Well, like I mentioned earlier, everyone in this country knows who he is. When you speak of Dunbalf-sama, what comes to mind is the Kingdom's hero who played an active role in the『Age of Upheaval』. He is an Elder of the Silver Linked Towers, a Sage and Summoning Expert feared by the other nations as the『War Power Dunbalf』, right?"

Indicating he was saying something pretty obvious, the commander told a tale that matched perfectly with the girl's memories. She could also confirm that even her… chuunibyou-esque alias had been passed down.

"Ohh…? A hero, you say?"

"That's right. It is said that in the wars following the founding of the country, he continuously held back the enemy advances and created a chance for our victory. Also, there's the story of how the platoon composed by the Elders descended the enemy camp into chaos. Moreover, I've heard that he was the one who developed the refining technology that, even today, only a few users have mastered and that he could use the powerful Xian techniques. Well, it's not just Dunbalf-sama, but there is a huge number of anecdotes regarding all the Sages."

The events Graia spoke of were just like the ones she had within her memories. The war was the same, as well as having the Xian Expert as a second class. There was also the fact that Dunbalf, the Elder, had researched and devised the refining technology. Without a doubt, all of those anecdotes referred to her past self and were passed down as the tale of Dunbalf, the Hero.

"Hmm, I see. And so, do you know anything about his last moments?"

As the material for her final judgement, she threw out a question that could very likely be the clincher for her hypothesis.

"His final days…? Mmmn, I haven't really heard anything about him having died… to begin with, this is something that happened thirty years ago, but one day he departed for the national borders to subjugate a group of monsters that had appeared there, and apparently was never seen again. There was just no way that Dunbalf-sama would have lost to some monsters, so when he disappeared, the whole country conducted a search; however, I heard that they couldn't find him in the end."

"…I see. Just as I thought."

His reply matched with what the girl remembered from the "today" in her head. *There was a definitive connection between that "past" and the "now" she was experiencing.* In other words, she had enough evidence to confirm that the current world was the same world as the game, albeit thirty years in the future.

From a game, to reality. She didn't know how or why it happened, but having figured out at least that much, she forced herself to calm down and stopped thinking about it for a while.

The problem now was, what would happen if she were to be honest and say that her name was Dunbalf? Since that name was more or less known in other countries, it would probably work fine; but in the Kingdom of Arkite, Dunbalf was someone widely famous. His appearance exuded dignity and elegance, he was an Elder of the Silver Linked Towers, a veteran Summoning Expert. Finally, according to the stories told by Graia, he was presently a hero of the Kingdom.

And now, that hero had been turned into a… lovely little girl. When she imagined the cold gazes she would receive after returning to her original form, the girl trembled at the immeasurable crisis she was in.

As a result, she naturally concluded that there was no other way but to make something up.

Since Graia and the others didn't seem to be able to use 『Inspect』, she decided to use it to her advantage. With that in mind, the young girl secretly snickered; it was a cunning plan, all for the sake of her self-protection and honor.

Nobody would readily believe that, after being gone for thirty years, the hero of the country would return as a little girl. Moreover, even if she were to desperately try and succeed in convincing them that she was Dunbalf, the ensuing questions about "How did it happen?" would be extremely dangerous; telling them that she had been creating her ideal woman—and grinning broadly all the while—was completely impossible. No matter how she thought about it, it would surely deliver something lethal to Dunbalf's image.

"Well then, it seems that I have yet to give you my name. I am Mira. Because I am still a beginner, it is a given that you do not know me."

Thus, what came out of her mouth was not the name “Dunbalf”, but an alias that she created on the spot from her real name[3].

Although she spoke while placing her hand against her chin, she felt extremely nervous since Dunbalf’s beard wasn’t there; Mira, the young girl, worried about her future.

Chapter 3

The Forest of Milete was situated near the national borders of the Kingdom of Arkite. Currently, in a meadow inside that forest, a huge pyre was burning. The knights there made sure to fuel it with the remains of the countless goblins killed; at the same time, a dark and thick smoke steadily raised from the fire, as if it were some kind of hellish miasma trying to find its way to heaven.

"Lady Mira… alright, I'll remember it! But I never thought you'd be someone this talented… a Summoning Expert, huh..."

"Being on that level should be expected, no?"

Mira, the Sage, had left the job of massacring the goblins to her Summoned Knight. Likewise, Graia, Captain of the Magic Clothed Knights, ordered his subordinates to do the cleanup afterwards. They continued their conversation without paying attention to the hard-working knights.

"We may be talking about goblins, but annihilating a group of that size in just a few moments? You must've had a pretty amazing teacher to learn magic of this level at your age."

So said Graia while fixing his gaze on the sword being held by the Dark Knight, who seemed to be waiting for further orders from its master.

"Hmm, well, it is like you said."

That wasn't the case, but she chose to go with his conjecture. It would be too tiresome to fabricate an explanation, so Mira quickly gave a confirmation while looking quite pleased with herself.

Then, right at that time, one of the knights hurried over to Graia.

"Sir, we have received a report. The escaped monster has yet to be found. For the time being, our pursuit group will stay here and wait for information from the ongoing search party."

"Understood. I'm a bit worried about it, though. It was a species we've never seen before... right now we can't do anything but wait. Well, excluding the search party, I guess we should all return to base."

After receiving the news, Graia called for a messenger to transmit his orders. The knight who came to give the report timidly observed the Dark Knight.

"Curious? That's a Summoned Armor Spirit, the Dark Knight."

Brimming with confidence, and as if trying to sound like Mira, Graia talked with his companion.

"A summon? First we find that weird monster and now this, how unusual... I've heard about Armor Spirits but… I never thought they would be *this* intimidating."

"Right? I was surprised too!"

While the two were having this back and forth, Mira was focusing on something weird she heard from them. Why would they treat Summoning as

something unusual? Certainly, it wasn't a class that many people chose to play with. And by the way, even less people played with the Blessings Expert class. But its users were really popular amongst other players, considering its main function of casting healing and supportive spells, something essential to a party. That said, Summoning wasn't really what you would call "unusual to see".

When that world was still a game, each of the Expert classes had at least one skill available for use right after being selected. All Summoning Experts started with the【Contract Seal】skill. It was the ability to form a contract with a defeated spirit and use it as one of the player's Summoned Spirit. However, on its own, the skill didn't hold any offensive power, so the problem was having to deal with a spirit first. This fact was the reason the class had a slow start and was considered fit only for experienced players.

Simply defeating an Armor Spirit didn't pose much of a problem. A player could ask his friends for help or even hire a mercenary to do the job. But after some trial and error, they found out that in order to summon it, the Summoning Expert must personally defeat the Armor Spirit.

Mira, or better, Dunbalf, obviously went through that process too. After stocking up with a large amount of bombs and healing items, he went to the『Ancient Battlefield of Hubeladius』. There, Dunbalf fought a fierce battle that lasted two hours and, in the end, resulted in his contract with the Armor Spirit, or the Dark Knight. While considered a very useful summon, it was mostly due to the knight being his *first* Summoned Spirit that he grew really fond of such a great companion.

However, that wasn't something anyone could do. Those who merely had some basic knowledge of the game, obtained through bulletin boards, tended to avoid going into the Summoning Expert class; the degree of difficulty was too high for them. Nonetheless, that didn't mean there were no Summoning Experts out there. Rather, the class had received a boost of popularity and members after the boards were filled with information from the heroic deeds of Dunbalf, to the point that many players picked up the class in order to follow his steps.

And yet, after hearing the conversation between the two knights, the situation seemed dire: somehow, the Summoning Expert class had lost its popularity again. It wouldn't be a stretch to think as such after considering that thirty years had passed.

Thirty years. By no means it was a short amount of time. Just how much had happened during those three decades?

"Do you have a minute? I want to ask you something."

Before the knights were finished with their preparations to return, Mira kept asking Graia one question after the other, in order to gather as much as possible information about the time she had lost.

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"Well then, be careful on your way back."

"I would like to say the same, but I know that Lady Mira's strength is the real deal. Let's just leave it like that."

Graia replied and laughed heartily while offering his right hand.

"This time I felt greatly at ease, thanks to you. I hope that when we meet again, you continue to use your abilities and help me put my subordinates to work even harder."

"I see, that is fine. If I find myself with time to spare, I will make sure to attend to your request."

Mira shook hands with the half-joking Graia and smiled happily.

"Yeah, and I'll be waiting!"

After saying that, Graia and his knights departed, without making any effort to stop their boastful voices from echoing in the distance.

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In the middle of the meadow, only burn marks could be seen where once existed a huge pile of goblin corpses being burned. Mira stood nearby, trying to organize the information she had collected.

Graia thoroughly answered every question she had asked. They were mostly focused on the current state of affairs of the Kingdom of Arkite.

Eight of the Nine Elders, Sages that served as cornerstones for the Kingdom's safety, were absent. That void in the country's defenses was being fulfilled temporarily by each one of the towers. In short, Dunbalf wasn't the only one who had disappeared thirty years ago. Less than one year after his disappearance, the same thing happened to all other elders and the Silver Linked Towers were left without their masters.

Fortunately, ten years later, one of them suddenly returned. It was the Master Wizard, 『Luminaria the Calamity』. Originally, the Kingdom's top brass had decided to keep in secret the disappearance incident, but it was by Luminaria's suggestion that the case was revealed to the public.

Even now, particularly talented individuals amongst the Elders' assistants and researchers were working in their master's stead. However, the difference in ability and experience was still too large and it seemed they were nearing their limits while dealing with the duties of a Sage.

Elder Luminaria. It was a very familiar name for Mira. That person had also an Expert class and, ever since the official service began, both of them had been playing together, forming a close bond with each other. She had a long and vibrant crimson hair, almost like it was made of roses. Just a look at her face could make anyone feel how strong was her will. Moreover, her tall, model-like build was coupled with a voluptuous chest. It was an appearance that would instantly charm anyone who happened to throw even a single glance at her. This was the Luminaria that Mira knew, the embodiment of

men’s desires.

And the person behind that character was a man. Not only that, he didn’t have any problem talking about indecent stuff with his fellow male friends. The feeling of discomfort that somehow arose during that kind of talk was still fresh in Mira’s memories.

Still, just like Dunbalf, she had disappeared thirty years ago. They both went through the same problem, at around the same time. And she had also returned. Even if it was twenty years earlier than Mira, the process was nearly the same—well, excluding the fact that Dunbalf’s original appearance was no more.

Finally, Mira decided on where to go next. The Luminaria that went through the same things as Dunbalf was, most probably, the acquaintance that had always played behind that avatar. Talking with each other might even help them find something new about their current situation. In short, Mira’s destination was Arkite Kingdom’s Heavenly Magic City of『Silver Horn』, the land where all skill users gathered.

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Mira walked through the forest, following a road that led directly to Silver Horn. The small gaps from the treetops revealed a faint tone of red being mixed with the blue sky. Checking the current time in floating menu, she confirmed that it was already past 5 p.m.

Considering what she knew from the game, it would take about one hour of walking to clear the distance from the meadow to the city, but she wasn’t not even halfway there. That was mostly because the girl made a few stops on her way. She made sure to observe, without hiding her enthusiasm, things like a butterfly sucking nectar from a flower, earthworms emerging from the ground, and so on. It was a level of realism she had never experienced there when it was still a game, so everything tickled her curiosity.

When Mira was about to close the menu from her bracelet, she remembered that there was an apple pie left inside her Item Box. Since she had been feeling hungry for some time already, it was something perfect for the moment. With her fingertip, Mira touched the item’s icon and, like some kind of magic trick, it appeared on the palm of her hand.

She carefully observed it. That apple pie had been inside the Item Box for one week already. No, more precisely, it was something she had bought *thirty years* ago. But strangely enough, the item’s appearance was perfectly fine. Hesitating a bit, she tried bringing it close to her petite nose and then, when it registered the sweet fragrance of vanilla, her stomach started to growl.

With resolve, Mira opened her mouth as much as she could and bit into the apple pie. Immediately, her mouth was filled with the crispy texture of the crust, combined with the sweet and sour taste of the apple. Mira’s taste buds were thoroughly stimulated.

Feeling confident, she opened the box once again and, this time, took out an "*Apple au Lait*". Without any exaggeration, it was a supply item that everyone from the Expert classes always had with them. That simple drink made of milk and apple had the properties of boosting the user's mana recovery rate. After smelling the faint, but sweet aroma of apple, Mira took a sip of the cream-colored drink.

"Delicious..."

The thought escaped her lips. Both the items she tasted were in pristine condition; the flavor and feeling of them going down her throat couldn't be better. It was the first time that Mira had eaten an apple pie, but she had never expected to be so impressed by its taste. The *Apple au Lait*, similarly, was something she had never seen before in the real world but also perfectly pleased her tongue with its sweetness.

Mira took a deep breath and let it go. While looking at the clouds slowly drifting through the sky, she used everything she had to feel the world she was in. There was the sensation of the wind that made her hair flutter, the pleasing scent of flowers brought to her nose, and even the fatigue she felt, proportional to the distance she had covered. Finally, there was the deliciousness of the apple pie and *Apple au Lait* spreading inside her mouth. A complete sense of reality was transmitted to Mira through a wide variety of stimuli. Taking into account those facts and carefully thinking about them, no matter how hard she tried, Mira couldn't find anything to deny it. *That world was real*.

For now, that was what she had chosen to work with, treating that place as reality. Even if such a premise were wrong, it wouldn't be any problem to just consider it as some funny story she had thought of. On the contrary, thinking that it was still a game could result in something irreversible happening. What if she died and *stayed* dead? Mira might never be able to respawn after dying. Being abandoned while in a pinch could lead to a really bad ending.

Luminaria seemed to know how to live as someone from this world, so hurrying up and meeting with her friend should be a priority now. With that in mind, Mira looked at the road ahead and moved forward.

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After a while, something appeared right in front of Mira. It had a gray body and ferocious eyes; its sharp, protruding canines, dripping with saliva. Releasing a fierce growl, it slowly approached its prey. Such a monster was already familiar to Mira.

It was called "Saber Dog", the first obstacle for beginner players. That area was the monster's territory; and there she was, a little girl who wandered outside the city and ended up far away, entering the forest completely alone. It was something so foolish one could think she wanted to kill herself.

That's what anyone would think after looking at that situation and judging Mira just by her appearance—at most, they would guess that her robed figure

meant that she was an Expert. However, it didn't change the fact that she also looked like a little girl still in her growing stage. If any adventurer were to see Mira there, most probably they would jump in to her rescue. Apparently, the Saber Dog thought the same about her: reflected in the monster's eyes was just a frail and weak girl.

The Saber Dog's length easily exceeded one meter and even an unprepared adult would have problems dealing with it. Thirsting for blood, the hunter slowly approached the prey who apparently had given up on fleeing.

Mira pointed her right hand at her foe. And, as she felt the usual sensation of casting an ability, the monster's face was instantly covered in fear. However, the next moment, the Saber Dog's body was destroyed as if something had crashed into it. Red flower-like smudges appeared on the trees that were directly behind the target.

In the game, the Saber Dog was one of the strongest lower class monsters, but a single one was easier to deal than an entire group of goblins. What Mira used was the spell named【Heavenly Xian：Shock Wave】, a basic ability of her Second Class, the Xian Expert. It was a simple ability that launched forward a shock wave to deal damage, but when used by someone of Mira's level, it would easily obliterate small fry.

"No problems with it, I think…"

Mira could use summoning spells, but wanted to check if the Xian abilities were available too. With that experiment, she confirmed that the way to use them was the same as when she was still in a game.

Finally, after going overboard against her enemy, the girl rushed back to her destination.

Chapter 4

The night sky was filled with countless shining stars. Although that starry sight wasn't anything new when compared with the game period, another sight was a completely different case: the livelihood in the city would surely catch anyone by surprise and make them gasp in astonishment.

Mira had finally arrived at her destination, the City of Silver Horn. While waving and thanking the gatekeeper for his work, she entered the city and for an instant stood there motionless, perplexed by the changes it went through. Still, in the end, that was something she could understand.

The walls surrounding Silver Horn had grown considerably bigger and, if the girl's memories didn't fail her, the town itself was easily over three times its old size. She could only confirm that it was the right city when she saw the sky-high towers sitting at the heart of that metropolis. Those buildings, known as the symbol of Silver Horn, were the Nine Silver Linked Towers.

"Of course, thirty years would change any city."

Mira muttered, as if trying her hardest to convince herself.

As the main street bustled with citizens coming back from work, with a sigh, the girl began walking and pushing her way through that people, moving towards the towers that were now further away from the city gates—of course, when compared with thirty years ago. Her child-like figure, illuminated by the moon and the flickering light of street lamps, stuck out in the crowd, catching everyone's attention. The person herself didn't notice, but many were captivated by her alluring beauty; others, worried about a little girl walking there so late at night, tried calling out to her. A wide variety of reactions to Mira's appearance accompanied her.

Something like that happening was probably inevitable. Her figure, created with the ideal female image in mind, had the power to take anyone's breath away. Who knows, even the creator himself might have had the same reaction —if he still possessed his *dear partner* with him, that is.

Surely, Graia and his knights deserved praise for holding out and not getting charmed by her.

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At the end of the main street, a wall of about four meters and a huge gate blocked Mira's path. Behind them, illuminated by the moonlight, stood the imposing figures of the Silver Linked Towers, buildings so tall one would have problems trying to look up at their top. To enter their premises, the only option was to go through the gate. However, to stop outsiders from getting in, some kind of special certification was required.

To unrelated people, a pass could be issued by the towers' administrative department and was only valid for a limited amount of uses. For the tower researchers, a『Silver Key』would be provided, allowing them entrance. Finally, engraved with nine towers on it, a『Master Key』was given to each one of the towers' highest ranking individuals, the Nine Elders.

Because of that gate, there was no need for any kind of guard so the place in front of the towers was mostly deserted. Naturally, as one of the Elders, Mira wouldn't have any problem entering the place… or so she thought.

When Mira stepped forward in front of the gate, just as she had done so many times before, she instantly noticed that something was amiss. Previously, the gates would automatically open whenever she approached the entrance, but now they didn't move a single inch. The girl then tried getting closer, but when it looked like she was about to bump into them, she quickly backed off.

"What is the meaning of this?"

While looking up at the gates, Mira restlessly moved in front of them; jumping, hopping, going back and forth, over and over again. However, as if it were some kind of boring kid that wouldn't react to anything funny, the gate looked down on her. Closed.

"Something is not right."

Murmured Mira, trying to recall everything related to that gate. A pass, the Silver Key and then the Master Key. Naturally, being the elder to the Tower of Summoning, she held the Master Key. Upon remembering it, she opened her Item Box, looking through the section for special items. Amongst the many icons there, Mira confirmed that the one for the key still existed and brought the item out.

By the way, it might be called a "key", but it wasn't the kind of object you inserted into a keyhole and twisted: it had the shape of a card. Carved on its silvery surface were nine towers, one of which sparkled gold, indicating the Master Key's corresponding tower.

There didn't seem to be any problems with that key. "*So what is happening here?*" pondered Mira, while placing one hand on her chin and using the other one to check the item. All of a sudden, and without any apparent reason at all, the gate opened.

"How did it… ohoho, I see..."

When she placed the Master Key back inside the Item Box, the gates closed. After taking out the item one more time, Mira saw them opening again. Before, the key had always worked while inside one's Item Box, but apparently it wasn't the case now and the person needed to have that item out.

Close. Open. Close. Open. Before she knew it, Mira had started playing with the gate, as if holding a grudge against it. The girl was baffled that the way to use the item had changed, but it wasn't much of a problem once she understood what to do. Then, after passing through the gate, Mira brought the

key back to her box.

Inside the premises was a huge lawn. There, it was possible to see a few researchers walking in a hurry, going back and forth between their towers. Although it was already past working hours, the tower researchers didn't seem concerned about that. Since Mira's memories from that place were outdated, she had been feeling a little anxious about how things had turned out at the towers, three decades after her disappearance. However, everything was still the same. Experts would never change their blind devotion to their work, no matter what. Thinking that, Mira breathed a sigh, both relieved and amazed.

The nine long towers were arranged forming a circle over that massive site. Going clockwise from the entrance, their respective names were: 『Tower of Sorcery』, 『Tower of Blessings』, 『Tower of Onmyou』, 『Tower of Exorcism』, 『Tower of Summoning』, 『Tower of Necromancy』, 『Tower of Xian』, 『Tower of Demonology』 and 『Tower of Abstractionism』.

Just as Graia had said to Mira, Luminaria was the Elder of Sorcery. And if she really was there, it would only be inside the Sage's Room, at the highest level of the Tower of Sorcery. Mira began moving towards the tower that directly faced the gates. On her way, some of the Experts tilted their heads in confusion after glancing at the girl's figure.

The towers themselves didn't require any kind of key to enter, so Mira simply walked in.

An atrium occupied the entire building, giving a real sense of spaciousness to the tower. That particular shape was the result of many "donut-like" facilities being stacked one over the other. In addition, going up to the ceiling was a spiral staircase that connected all the floors.

After repeating, over and over, the process of building a floor to accommodate new researchers, when they finally noticed it the place had already reached thirty stories. Obviously, using only the stairs to climb a tower that big would take too long. To solve that problem, Abstractionism techniques were applied to create an elevator in the middle of the building.

The learning method for Abstractionism didn't follow any linear approach and many of its techniques held peculiar effects. With the player's own creativity, it was possible to use them for many things like ambient illumination, as a power source for devices, etc. The elevator was also one of the fruits of the players' wits. And not only that, the entire tower was built by them. That was something that could be done since the early days of the game's official launch, from a time when no one knew how to properly learn new skills.

Every new player had to choose one out of three available countries to start their game in. Those nations were called the "Beginners' Three Kingdoms" and, once a player reached a certain rank, they were forced to leave that country—something very bad for them: players who weren't members of a country suffered a lot of restrictions and couldn't receive any of the benefits given by it.

First of all, the penalties for dying were absolutely wicked, causing the player to lose all the contents of their Item Box. Furthermore, the player

would be afflicted with a serious debilitating debuff for an entire day, stopping them from performing well at combat. Another restriction was that if anyone tried to cross borders they had to pay an expensive fee to continue.

Now, if the player was affiliated with a country, they wouldn't lose any items and the harsh debuff would wear off in a few minutes just by resting in their own kingdom. Also, the fees for crossing the borders would be reduced to nearly nothing. Finally, the country gave considerable benefits to their players, such as the access to all of its facilities—free of charge.

However, belonging to a kingdom also had a drawback, since there were taxes to be properly paid. Even then, the pros outweighed the cons.

In spite of the fiendish setting of being forcibly thrown out of the their own countries, the players that initially had problems with it eventually accepted that as something natural to Ark Earth Online. And, when they were about to come into terms with living forever as a wanderer without nationality, the first founders appeared.

With that event, players that left the Beginners' Three Kingdoms could finally maintain the benefits of being affiliated to a country. And while people rushed to create new nations, fights over territories broke out frequently, ushering in a new era of war.

Founders hired other players as mercenaries, on a high pay, to bolster their forces. Citizens—or rather, players belonging to the country—also participated in the war. If someone wanted to challenge themselves, they could gather about ten NPC soldiers to fight alone and still emerge victorious.

If a country grew bigger, the number of players affiliated to it would also increase. Consequently, the kingdom's funds would multiply even more and, once it secured enough top-level players, it could easily win the war.

That situation spread through the entire continent and gradually become a problem. Then, when the difference in power between large and small countries became too big, it reached a point that, immediately after being founded, small kingdoms would get attacked and annexed by the bigger ones. The world began to look harsher for newly created countries.

Amidst all that chaos, the nation leaders assembled together and entered into a treaty:

〖*National Power Ranking Restriction*〗

This international pact created a rating system with five levels based on every nation's territorial, economic and military strength. The levels defined there were used to restrict the number of players allowed to participate in a war. And the most peculiar characteristic from the treaty was the fact that, during a war, the ranking level of the weakest country should be used to dictate the maximum number of players allowed to participate in the battles. Additionally, it was decided that the players eligible to fight had to be chosen at random.

Concerning the mercenary and citizen players, a restriction was imposed. It stated that, of the maximum number of players participating in the war,

seventy percent had to be citizens from the country. With this, the strength between each nation's group of players tended to find an equilibrium. At the same time, that decision raised the usefulness of soldier NPCs in a battle and created a situation where a player's individual strength greatly influenced the course of war.

Not everything was perfect, however. In those days, players belonging to the Expert class only had their basic abilities to use. Admittedly, they could make do by forming a party during the early stages of the game, but by the time they reached the levels of seasoned players, Experts could only be considered a nuisance to others.

Generally treated by the players as a class of failures, nearly all Experts ended up completely losing their roles in the game due to that treaty. Without amounting to even fine NPC soldiers' worth of war strength, when a player of that class occupied a precious slot in their nation's quota of players, the war would eventually be lost. It resulted in a movement, from behind the scenes, that further progressed the persecution of Expert class users.

Lying in the southeastern part of the continent, the Kingdom of Arkite was a small country born in the middle of that age of wars. In order to protect the newly founded countries and stop them from getting caught in a conflict, the treaty had declared that, within four months since its creation, no nation could be attacked by anyone. Still, even if there weren't any large kingdoms nearby, recently created countries would become an easy target for the countless small and medium-sized ones.

Against all odds though, the Kingdom's doomed fate wasn't settled. The leader of Arkite, Solomon, was friends with Dunbalf since the Open β. And that same Solomon had invited Dunbalf to his country, in a time when the persecution of Expert class users still existed. Following that, Expert players from everywhere heard about a nation that would accept them and, seeking to become citizens, moved to the Kingdom of Arkite one after the other.

Solomon had always watched over Dunbalf, so he knew the hardships that Expert users went through. Because of that very fact, Arkite's leader had an ambition.

When Solomon gathered and accepted all Experts, an interesting phenomenon began to take place there: it was the information exchange between fellow Expert users. Finding a method to learn new abilities was hard enough and when someone discovered a completely new skill, they would monopolize it, gaining a huge advantage against others; during those days, information could be sold at a high price.

But that didn't happen in Arkite. Everyone that gathered at the Kingdom worked together as comrades and would teach each other how to learn their abilities and what effects those skills had.

Regarding the wars, Solomon had already given up on them, but the citizens still prepared for battle. They wanted to be useful to the only country that had accepted their pitiful selves. Experts finally abandoned the idea of only working alone, growing even more powerful with their combined strength used.

And it was there that Solomon saw a chance of victory.

The sovereign lent a portion of the Kingdom's territory to the Expert players for the sole purpose of researching abilities. And on that territory, they built nine facilities, one for each type of Expert class; later, those buildings would serve as the foundations for the current Silver Linked Towers. That marked the moment the strongest nation was born, a small country that could oppose and destroy the invasion of even the largest ones. That was the history of the Kingdom of Arkite.

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In this world, those events had happened over thirty years ago. While deeply reminiscing about her past, Mira stepped in the elevator, aiming for the Sage's Room at the top floor.

Incidentally, it wasn't the usual elevator that could be seen in the real world. It worked as a transparent tube with a thin and round stone that would go up and down. Then, completing the device was a magic circle drawn on the stone's surface.

A passageway extended from each of the floors to the elevator's tube and, if looked at from below, its appearance would resemble that of a fish spine. For that reason, people started calling it "Fish Bone Elevator". But that was another history from Mira's old days.

Chapter 5

The Sage's Room occupied the entirety of the topmost floor in the Tower of Sorcery and was split into four distinct areas: the Elder's private room, their laboratory, an office and their aide's room.

A transparent membrane blocked both the front and back of the moving elevator. Mira waited for the device to arrive at its destination and, when the membrane raised to allow her access into the floor, she went through the front exit. Then, after crossing the semi-transparent tube that linked the elevator to the floor, she arrived at a circular corridor and gazed at what was right in front of her: the door to the laboratory.

"Heeey! Luminaria! Are you there? Answer me!!"

Mira brought her tiny, balled-up fists to the door several times. Her young, bell-like voice echoed in the corridor, along with the dangerous sounds of a door about to give in to her strikes.

After becoming one of the Elders, nearly all of Luminaria's ingame time was spent confined inside the laboratory. So, if there was one place she could be in, it would most probably be there.

That was why Mira went directly for that door and started hitting it, waiting for Luminaria to scream "Keep it down, will you?!" while kicking open the entrance to her laboratory. However, that usual exchange between them didn't happen this time. Finally, Mira stopped her fists and tried listening through the door.

"She is not inside...?"

Luminaria, in the rare moments when she actually left her room, would often conduct dangerous experiments in the nearby forest.

(As expected of someone who cannot read the mood.)

Disappointed, Mira thought about her friend and, while placing a hand on her chin, pondered about what she had to do now.

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"May I ask who you are?"

Mira, who had been walking left and right in front of the door, started to consider whether or not to wait there until Luminaria came back. Abruptly, at that exact moment, a calm and composed woman's voice called out to her from behind. *A voice that sounded pretty familiar to the girl*.

And indeed, when she turned around, her sight was greeted by a beautiful woman dressed as a secretary. Wearing glasses that suited her position and possessing a blond hair that reached her shoulders, she stared at Mira with her blue eyes while revealing a puzzled look on her face.

“Ohh, it has been a while, Litalia. Do you know the whereabouts of Luminaria?”

That beauty, called “Litalia”, was an aide working directly for an Elder. It was known that, in order to assist them in their research and daily chores, the Kingdom would dispatch an NPC to those who became Elders. So, in short, Litalia was Luminaria’s aide.

Incidentally, that woman belonged to the elven race. Viewed by many as a dream-like species, their longevity meant that, even after a long period of time, her beauty would still remain intact.

Although players in Ark Earth Online couldn’t choose any race other than the human race, NPCs weren’t bound by that restriction. And not only Elves, there were many other famous species from fiction that they could belong to, such as the Dwarves, Gnomes, Sirens, Werewolves and Giants. Game-original groups also existed, including the sturdy-bodied Garidia Clan and the ones known for having a human-like appearance, except for their cat-ears and tail: the Meow Tribe.

“Who might you be, young lady? This floor can only be reached through the elevator and even then, only a few people should know how to do it.”

Emanating a tense aura around her, Litalia’s eyes were deeply filled with suspicion.

“Like I was saying before, I—oh... of course...”

At that point, Mira remembered that, currently, her figure was that of a little girl and not of the solemn Dunbalf. And since Litalia couldn’t use “Inspect”, she had to ask who the little girl was. Mira wasn’t sure if the aide would believe her if she told her real name. But the biggest problem wasn’t that. What if those who already knew the great Dunbalf started to think, wrongly or not, that he actually enjoyed living as a little girl? It would be completely unbearable for Mira if that were to happen.

She wouldn’t mind telling that secret to Luminaria, though. First of all, Mira had witnessed it countless times before and knew that her friend was someone who enjoyed that kind of stuff more than anyone else. If Luminaria were to see Dunbalf’s current state, she would say with confidence that it was “cute”.

However, what happened now was a bit unexpected.

Mira remembered it too late, but just as Litalia had said, only a few people should know the special method to reach that floor using the elevator; it was a mechanism added in order to block desperate fans from invading the Sage’s Room. And as one of the elders, Mira obviously knew how to do it, easily arriving at the topmost floor of the tower. But Litalia could only wonder how the little girl in front of her was able to get there. With that, Mira couldn’t try to conceal her identity by using the excuse that she was just a mere Summoning Expert, passing by to visit the Sage’s Room.

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While tracing her chin with her fingertip, Mira was deep in thought, trying to find a way out of that predicament. She had to think of a convenient explanation that would keep her identity a secret and still justify how she knew about the elevator's security mechanism. It had to be something that also allowed her to freely move in and out of the tower.

Suddenly, a great idea came to her.

"Lady, do you know who Dunbalf is?"

Displaying a confident smile, Mira broke the silence and turned her eyes up at Litalia.

"Obviously! He is the Elder of the Tower of Summoning!"

Sounding a bit more lively, the aide immediately replied.

"Yes, good. I am the pupil of that same Dunbalf. He had a few words to tell Lumi—... Lady Luminaria, so I was ordered to come here and transmit the message."

With her heart beating like crazy, Mira still managed to not let her appearance falter a single bit while telling a completely fabricated story. She then tried to check Litalia's reaction to it.

"Dunbalf-sama's…!? If that's the case, then certainly… no, wait. I have never heard of Dunbalf-sama having a pupil such as yourself."

For a moment, right after Mira professed herself, Litalia revealed a clear look of excitement on her face. Of course, the aide's reaction was something completely natural. Right before her, that young girl called herself the apprentice of someone who had been considered missing since thirty years ago.

"Indeed. I only became his pupil after the disappearance incident."

"After he disappeared!? Then, that means Dunbalf-sama has returned to the Kingdom!?"

Not looking satisfied, Litalia pressured Mira even more, causing the girl's expression to lose a bit of her usual confidence.

"Exactly. However, due to some circumstances, he is unable to move from where he is. That is why I came in his stead."

"Is that so? Dunbalf-sama is… but, just what in the world happened to keep him stuck in a place?"

"Ahh… hmm, you see..."

The idea was perfect, but it still lacked specific details. With that in mind, Mira thought of an appropriate excuse that used something she often did as Dunbalf. Assuming it was also a fact that happened in the history of that world, it would probably work.

"He has been stuck at the City of Mythical Beasts in order to train a new Summoned Spirit."

Mira answered with unease, wondering if it would really work.

"...Training yet another Summoned Spirit. That is so like Dunbalf-sama. Sometimes he would suddenly leave for that place to grow one of his spirits. I guess he never changed, huh? If that is the case, I can understand why he cannot move from there. Oohh, Dunbalf-sama, how I wish to see your face already."

It was an excuse born out of desperation, but apparently, Litalia was satisfied with it as she nodded in agreement. Also, Mira was now confident that, one way or another, her past actions had been engraved in the world's history.

The City of Mythical Beasts was a pretty popular farming spot for players. But even though it was called a "city", no one really resided there. That was because the *ruins of an ancient city* occupied the entire place, only serving as home to a great variety of monsters and mythical beasts.

Dwelling within that town was an ancient blessing that could be earned after killing the monsters there. It steadily increased in power as the player defeated even more monsters, boosting their experience and recovery rates and also increasing the chances of a rare item dropping. With the wide number of enemies that spawned in that city, it was a classic farming spot for high ranked players.

However, once a player left that town, the blessing would be reset. So it was common sense amongst everyone that, if one really wanted to farm there, they had to give their all by buying a large quantity of items and spending as much time as they could killing monsters.

"Yes, that is what happened. So, about the matter with Lumi—... Lady Luminaria..."

Mira thought it was a good opportunity to ask Litalia, who seemed to be in some kind of a trance.

"Oh, right. Currently, Luminaria-sama is… oh no, wait a moment… I cannot say that yet, really. Indeed, what you told me was something that Dunbalf-sama would often do. But anyone familiar with him would know that, so it does not prove that you are his pupil. Do you have any kind of evidence to prove it?"

Litalia's respect for Dunbalf, who once supported the Kingdom together with Luminaria, went beyond admiration. After hearing about the possibility of him being alive, her whole face lit up with hope but she quickly composed herself, determined on finding whether it was the truth or not.

"Evidence? Huummpf… this should be enough, right?"

After considering her options for a bit, Mira opened her Item Box and took out something that only Dunbalf possessed, an item that could easily work as the proof. Of course, it was the silver card engraved with nine towers, the Master Key.

"This is… the Master Key to the Tower of Summoning! So you really are Dunbalf-sama's… would you honor me with your name, young lady?"

As soon as she finished verifying the item, Litalia let out a smile.

“My name is Mira. Litalia, I have already heard about you from my master. And again, is Lady Luminaria not here?”

“Indeed. Luminaria-sama has left for the Lunatic Lake and will only return tomorrow.”

“Oh, I see. Then there is no other option for me but to come back later.”

If she wasn’t there, Mira couldn’t do anything about it. Traveling to the Lunatic Lake right now would be too troublesome, so she concluded it would be fine to visit the tower again after Luminaria had returned.

“My, look at the time! It is already late at night and you could simply stay in my room. If you are fine with it, we could wait there until Luminaria-sama returned, right? Then, if possible, I would like to hear so much more about Dunbalf-sama!”

Litalia suddenly approached the little girl, like a cat aiming for its prey. With her back pressed against the door, Mira’s expression stiffened as she averted her gaze from the aide.

Even though Litalia only wanted to hear about Dunbalf, it would be just something fabricated on the spot by Mira. It wasn’t a good idea to prolong a story that could fall apart without a moment’s notice.

“No, I have a few more things to take care of, so I hope you let me return here tomorrow.”

Mira spoke without any hesitation. Quickly running away from there was the best course of action she could take.

“Ahh, no way… forget about the entire night then, I just want a little bit of your time. Mira-sama, what happened thirty years ago? Please tell me what Dunbalf-sama had to go through!”

“Now is not the time for this. I have to first take care of the tasks entrusted to me by my master.”

Pulling herself free from the clinging Litalia, Mira leaped inside the elevator and started it, moving towards the first floor. There, she decided to think of a suitable excuse to give in case of an emergency—such as the one she had just experienced. While feeling a bit of regret from what she had said, Mira tried looking up at the top floor, only to see the complete change in Litalia’s appearance, her entire body clinging to the transparent tube. The girl let out a deep sigh at that sight.

“She seemed way more intellectual...”

That kind of behavior wasn’t something the NPC Litalia had before. When that world was still a game, she always gave off the impression of being a hardworking secretary. Was it because thirty years had passed? Or was she like that all along? While supporting her chin with a hand, Mira smiled wryly, looking at the the floors going past her.

After several seconds, Mira reached the first floor and, with regained composure, took the opportunity to encourage the researchers with a “*Do your*

best!" shout, right as she was passing by them. It was a habit of sorts she had as Dunbalf and, unbeknown to her, when the researchers heard the cheers of an unfamiliar girl that had suddenly walked through the tower, many of them got fired up for their all-nighter.

Having left the Tower of Sorcery, Mira went directly to the Tower of Summoning. Luminaria would be coming back tomorrow, but until then, the girl wanted to confirm something by herself. The fact that she had tasks to do wasn't entirely a lie: Mira had to verify her base of operations, the Sage's Room. If the girl could use it just as she always had, then it wouldn't be a problem to spend the night there.

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The structure inside the tower was the same as the Tower of Sorcery, its dead-silent interior as bright as day, illuminated by the flickering light generated with Abstractionism. Mira squinted a bit at that and, while thinking of later adjusting the amount of light generated, operated the elevator to reach the top floor.

Differently from the other tower, that place was completely deserted and she couldn't see any researchers working on the floors she passed by. At that sight, Mira remembered how the knights told her that Summoning was something unusual. It was obvious, now that the number of Summoning Experts had decreased. After personally experiencing such a fact, it felt like she were seeing off her retired comrades, a feeling of helplessness welling up inside her.

Chapter 6

The top floor of the Tower of Summoning. Its layout was the same as the one inside the Tower of Sorcery, a large circular corridor giving access to each one of its four areas. And walking down that corridor without any hesitation was Mira, her destination right ahead: the Private Room.

A red carpet was laid over the hallway and a collection of black armor, similar to the Dark Knight, decorated the way to the room. They were items awarded to Dunbalf as proof of his achievements in the wars he had fought for the Kingdom. After giving a quick look at the two pieces standing in front of her, Mira reached out for the imposing black door that was located between them.

"Oops, I almost forgot it."

She suddenly stopped her hand and, while thinking she would never really get used to doing that, brought out the Master Key out of her Item Box. As if it were glad for its master's return, the moment Mira held the item close to the door, a **click** could be faintly heard near the door knob and its lock came undone. With the cool sensation from touching the metal spreading through her warm hand, the girl twisted the knob and entered her Private Room, only to be assaulted by a strange feeling of discomfort.

First of all, since the entranceway didn't have a special spot for the footwear to rest, Mira couldn't find a proper place to remove and drop her boots on, so she just left them there. When it was still a game, she never had to take her shoes off while entering a room. But now, with that vivid sense of reality there, the girl couldn't help but feel uncomfortable while wearing boots indoors.

Finally barefoot, the girl advanced into the room she was already familiar with, and caught sight of something that covered four fifths of the entire floor: a carpet made with the pelt of a demon beast king, the Grand Caecus. Its shining gold fur was soft to the touch but extremely strong; it wouldn't be a stretch to say that even if martial artists sparred on that carpet it would still remain intact after the battle.

That rare item was something Dunbalf asked an artisan to make, using the pelt he had received as a reward from the "Demon Beast King Subjugation Tour", an event where all the Nine Elders participated. Raw materials collected from monsters of that class were considered high grade components for the best kinds of equipment. So it wasn't a surprise that, when ordered to make a mere carpet out of the fur, the first-class leatherworker complained to Dunbalf and asked him, over and over again, if he was really sure about doing that with such a precious pelt.

In a sense, it was an item that brought memories of Mira's past.

The carpet lay there, as if bowing down to its master, sharing place with several other familiar accessories gathered by Dunbalf. However, their positions were slightly off.

"Did Mariana do this?"

She could think of only one person as being the source of that out-of-place feeling: Dunbalf's particular assistant, a resident of the Tower of Summoning. The girl reached that conclusion simply because there could be no one else capable of entering the Private Room—except for her, who held the Master Key, and *her aide*. Since its owner had been absent for thirty years, it was clear to Mira that it was none other than Mariana who tidied up the room, just like she had always done before.

The Mariana from Mira's memories was exactly the kind of person who would do that. There were many places for storage inside the Private Room; whenever Dunbalf returned from farming monsters, leaving his loot in complete disorder there, the next time he logged in everything would be perfectly sorted in their respective storages. In short, every time the room got cluttered, the very next day it would appear tidied up.

Because of that, since Dunbalf became an elder, he never had to do any kind of cleaning anymore. If one were to describe Mariana as a character from a rom-com, she would be the stubborn childhood friend that always took care of the main character's needs.

Now, regarding the items' positions that made Mira feel anxious, it was a fact that, when it was still a game, her aide had been diligently reorganizing them every month. Mariana was someone who seemed obsessed with the likes of fortune-telling and Feng Shui, so whenever Dunbalf left her to do as she pleased, the room would turn up like that. It was possible that, during those thirty years, the assistant still kept doing the same thing, every single month. That sudden thought made Mira feel a bit worried about Mariana.

However, the girl decided to leave those matters for tomorrow, since her body was already begging for rest—and she still had to find where the bed was. Before, if Kagami felt tired while playing, he could simply log out and sleep on his own futon. But the circumstances were different now: there was no way to "log out" so Mira had to sleep there. The problem right there was, because she had never required to use the bedroom of that room, she didn't know its location.

It would obviously be there, in one of the many rooms that occupied her Private Room, so Mira had to search them, one by one.

The first room was the Collection Room. It had a lineup of rare and strange items collected all around the world.

The second one was the Refinery Room. It was full of materials and information related to the refinement techniques developed by Dunbalf.

The third was the Storeroom. Things like weapons, armor and experimentally refined items were neatly arranged there. As someone who knew that Dunbalf was the kind of person to leave his items scattered around, if Mariana saw that room she would surely make a fuss, wanting it for herself.

The next one was the Restroom. Mira instantly remembered that since arriving in this world, she had yet to relieve herself. As if on cue, the girl was afflicted with a very familiar feeling coming from her abdomen, indicating that

her body needed to do a *certain something*.

It wasn't that she had forgotten about that. She just *wanted* to forget about it. Even before she had arrived in Silver Horn, the signs had already been there, coming and going from time to time. But no matter what, Mira didn't want to accept it. Her entire being screamed that if she actually did *that thing* while in a little girl's body, there would be no turning back anymore.

Unfortunately, it wasn't a matter that would simply disappear if the girl endured it. Rather, the more she held it in, the more it would be worse for her body. And now, after seeing a room that had all the tools she would require to actually finish *that deed*, the things Mira tried so hard to forget resurfaced, just like something thrown in the Dead Sea. It was a warning that her body was nearing its limits.

With her resolve fully formed, she closed the door to the toilet room and, after a short while, a faint sound of flowing water could be heard from inside the room.

(Luminaria would have laughed like a maniac if she saw this.)

Merely imagining the kind of face her friend would make at such a moment was enough for Mira to smile bitterly. The girl then unconsciously held a hand to her abdomen, lost in thought about what she had just done inside the restroom.

"Well, that was simple. No matter how you look at it, what I did was something completely normal."

That wasn't directed at anyone but to Mira herself, a single murmur with the intent of convincing her mind that everything was fine. The hardest part of her problem was actually doing it for the first time, and now that she had cleared it, the girl felt cheerfully refreshed.

However, some dirty thoughts still passed through her mind; it couldn't be helped, her real personality was that of a healthy man full of vigor. Indeed, without any doubt, Mira felt a little excited. Being frank about it and acting like it wasn't a problem was a way she found to justify herself.

Afterwards, when she opened the door to the fifth room, a completely joyful Mira removed all of her clothes inside the Bathroom and, stark naked, took a bath.

(Having a long hair is a bit tough… it will take some time to finish it.)

While feeling a bit more awake after bathing in hot water, the—still naked—girl started drying her dazzling silver hair with the towel. When she finally finished it, Mira hung the cloth on an appropriate place and then immediately sat on the leather sofa, her small and naked bottom directly touching the furniture.

As she relaxed there, Mira opened the menu for her available items, trying to find any kind of clothing she could use as a bathrobe. The girl had noticed it once she came out of the bath, but her usual robe was smeared with blood and dirt. Even though she wasn't a neat freak, Mira didn't want to wear that dirtied robe right after taking a bath.

Looking through the item list, a certain icon caught her attention. It was an item called『Robe of the Celestial Maiden』. Available only to a Xian Expert, that special equipment was a reward for clearing the quest『Legend of the Celestial Maiden』and, when equipped, would strengthen the user's Xian-specific abilities. However, the item's design didn't suit Dunbalf at all, so it had been shelved.

When it was still a game, she had cared considerably about the appearance of all equipment Dunbalf wore. That obsession was so strong that if an item didn't make him look like a grand wizard, it wouldn't be equipped, no matter how good its bonuses were.

But things were different now and Mira wondered how it would look on her. The robe itself had a wavy appearance and was simply flawless. She imagined herself wearing that item and thought that it could work now, since her figure was that of a young girl. *There's no time like the present, right?* With just that kind of reasoning, Mira took out the Robe of the Celestial Maiden from her Item Box and immediately wore it.

At first sight, it looked like a slightly larger babydoll. The lower hem reached near Mira's calves and its sleeves covered at most half of her upper arms. Coupled with the robe's slightly pink fabric, that didn't offer any kind of resistance to the touch, it was an item that lived up to its "Celestial" name. Obviously, not only Dunbalf, but anyone with a male avatar would be against equipping *that*.

"My, this looks quite good."

The dark night reigned supreme outside of the room, with the only thing separating it from the inside being the window. From there, a faint light was projected and, even though it barely illuminated Mira's figure, she could discern her appearance. While using that window as a substitute for a mirror, the young girl observed her scantily clad body, dressed in nothing but a robe. She was smiling during the entire process, as if completely charmed by that image.

That same expression still held a bit of lust in it, but her entire appearance seemed closer to that of a mischievous and seductive girl, merely holding an innocent smile.

Afterwards, Mira continued her search for the bedroom, looking through every single room there. Additionally, in order to have a good set of changing clothes ready for her, she took out various other robes from the Storeroom and threw them unceremoniously over the sofa. Those were the clothes that Dunbalf had been using thirty years ago; beautifully decorated and painted robes that gave off an air of grandeur. Basically, Mira chose only her favorite items to wear for later.

The girl then wondered about how she would deal with the laundry, but since Mariana was there, she could leave that matter to her aide, along with all the clothes scattered around the place. *Not like it hadn't happened before*.

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Mira leaned against the window and, while observing the street lights in the distance, let out a small yawn. Then, she placed her hands on her hips and lightly stretched her body, only to feel even more sleepy as her eyelids started to weigh down. Checking the current time from the menu, it was already over 10 p.m.

Usually, that was the period when Kagami would be playing in full throttle, but since Mira had to walk inside the forest, her tiny body accumulated a lot of fatigue. The bath she took just kept her awake for a bit longer and now the girl's drowsiness was clearly apparent; as she wiped both eyes with the back of her hand, a second yawn came out from her tiny mouth.

At any rate, Mira's purpose in being inside her personal base wasn't just to check if everything was alright there. She also came to meet the other player who probably went through the same situation as her, Luminaria. However, since Litalia had said that her master would only arrive tomorrow, there was nothing else Mira could do right now. After reaching that conclusion, the little girl walked towards the bedroom, as if drawn in by an invisible force, and finally collapsed onto the bed.

The softness of the mattress gently pushed back against Mira's small and young body. She could feel Mariana's very feelings that permeated the bed, prepared every single day by the aide who longed for her master's return.

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Connected through its borders to a large, crescent-shaped lake, Lunatic Lake was the capital of the Kingdom of Arkite. And lying near the dead centre of the city was the Arkite Castle, the King's residence.

King Solomon let his entire body rest on the back of his leather chair, right after finishing up all his duties for the day. Then, seemingly annoyed at the pile of documents he had just dealt with, he kicked the desk where those very documents had been sitting on. The recoil from that made the chair's small wheels clatter around, bringing Solomon closer to the window. There, under the light generated by Abstractionism, he used his fingertips to touch the silver bracelet attached to his left arm, all the while staring at the seemingly empty air. Visible only to its owner, the projected terminal floated in front of him and displayed a list of names, each one of them colored in either white or gray.

"Dunbalf…"

Solomon verified that terminal every day. Floating there was the name of Dunbalf, written in white letters. The King raised his face and, after turning his chair to face the window, observed the dark and silent night. On the other side of the faintly visible mountains was the Heavenly Magic City of Silver Horn, the land of all the heroes who served the country. When Solomon was lost in thought, reminiscing about that city, a reserved knocking coming out from the door brought him back.

"You may enter."

"Excuse me, Your Majesty."

The man who opened the door and bowed was one of the Arkite Kingdom's heralds. With a sheet of paper in hand, he stepped forward inside the room and waited for his liege's permission to begin. After Solomon prompted the man with a look, the herald spread out the paper and began reading its contents out loud.

"This is the scheduled report from Graia-sama of the Magic Clothed Knights. 『*We have identified the group of monsters that had appeared near the national borders. With the help of a young adventurer girl, the cleanup was finished. However, an unidentified monster escaped, so a search party with my subordinates is under way. P.S. The adventurer's name is Mira. She is a fine and lovely little lady with a long, silvery hair.*』"

After receiving the report, Solomon made an unnoticeable frown. Until now, every group of monsters that had appeared was only composed of beings that lived in the vicinity of the Kingdom. Any knight tasked with protecting the country would be able to identify those monsters, so actually finding an unknown individual was something clearly unusual.

"Did it get mixed in with the herd of monsters by accident? While they were moving it could… or, maybe… hmmpf, I don't get it."

The King sighed and dropped that thought. Then, when he raised his face, he casually made eye contact with the messenger who still held the report in his hands.

"Is there anything else?"

"Yes, sir."

"Alright, let me hear it."

"There is a message from Silver Horn's Tower of Sorcery. Its aide, Litalia-sama, contacted us via the magic phone to inform that 'Mira', a young girl claiming to be Dunbalf's pupil, had appeared there."

"Did you just say… *his* pupil?"

Solomon looked at his bracelet terminal, displaying the name of Dunbalf. Since thirty years ago and until yesterday, that name had been colored in gray. Now, after the letters had turned white, a young girl appeared, claiming to be the disciple of the hero of the Kingdom, *his* best friend. There was also the adventurer who helped the Magic Clothed Knights in exterminating the swarm of monsters. And both of them were called "Mira".

"My, this can't be a simple coincidence."

Until a while ago, the King's eyes were devoid of color after the incessant and exhausting office work he had done; however, they were now lit with a strong and joyful light.

"Promptly send out an envoy to Silver Horn. They must treat that 'Mira' with the utmost courtesy and invite her for an audience with me. I'm leaving the personnel choice up to you."

"Certainly, Your Majesty! At once!"

Folding his report and bowing, the herald left the room. After following his subordinate with his eyes, Solomon directed his gaze once again towards the far away city, the place known for its nine towers. On its way, the pitch-black mountains seemed to absorb all of the moonlight that reached them. In contrast to that, around the castle, the lake that gave name to the city shone brightly with the reflected light, a brilliant and fleeting spectacle that could be seen all over its surface.

Chapter 7

It was still early in the morning. While the birds' increasingly chirping announced the beginning of daybreak, a carriage rushed through the traffic in Silver Horn, its horses loudly striking the ground with their hooves. That vehicle waved the national emblem of the Kingdom of Arkite and went straight for the Silver Linked Towers; puzzled by such an occurrence at the first light of the day, many citizens stood still while observing its movements.

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Through closed eyelids, the young girl's pupils were stimulated by the dim sunlight, and she was slowly brought back from her drifting consciousness.

After a while, Mira sat on the canopy bed and started tidying up her thin—and now out of shape—clothing. At the same time, she opened her small lips and took a deep breath, trying to keep her drowsy self awake. That, however, was in vain. Succumbing to the vestiges of sleepiness that still affected her, the girl's eyes closed as her back made contact with the bed, her mind once again drifting away to the land of dreams.

Then, the moment she had fallen asleep, Mira's slumber was disturbed anew by something else. Inside that quiet room, at the highest floor of the tower where not even the birds' cries could reach, a muffled and rhythmical sound could be heard, over and over again. Against her own will, the girl ended up half-woken by that terrible noise. While staring blankly around her with unfocused eyes, she got up and, surprised, found herself in an unfamiliar and very luxurious room.

"Where am I…?"

Triggered by the high-pitched voice that escaped from her lips, all the events that had happened yesterday suddenly gushed forth like a geyser and filled Mira's mid. At the same time, similar to dizziness, she was affected by a slight sense of loss as the girl became aware of her current state. "*Ohh, I see…*" was the only thing she could mutter in response, resigned to her fate.

Still not used to her petite body, Mira let herself slide to the edge of the bed and sat there, taking a breather. But all of a sudden, from that position, she caught sight of her young and charming legs, now revealed by the flipped over end of her robe. The sunlight shining in from the gap in the curtains worked almost like a spotlight, somehow emphasizing even more the pure whiteness of her skin; Mira was simply at a loss for words.

Even though she was blushing like a teenage boy, the young girl observed her legs and used her fingertips to quietly feel and verify their skin: it had just the proper degree of flexibility and softness, as ascertained by Mira's sense of touch. As those signals reached her brain, she was made perfectly aware of everything that had happened yesterday, and her consciousness lost every last

drop of sleepiness.

"...But wait a moment, just what is this noise so early in the morning?"

With her mind now completely awake, the girl finally noticed the incomprehensible and rhythmic sound that had started while she was still asleep; consequently, she strained her ears to try and identify it.

*(*knock knock knock*)*

First came the sound of something hard being hit; next was the faint and unclear voice of a person. In the end, what Mira managed to grasp was that at least two people were talking, so she left the bedroom to check if anything had happened. As she got closer to the main door of the Private Room, the voices *and* their intention were made clearer, the chaotic noise from before now forming recognizable words in Mira's ears.

"Mira-sama, are you there? Mira-sama."

"Litalia-sama, are you really sure that the disciple of Dunbalf-sama is here?"

The first voice seemed to belong to an elegant woman while the second one came from an unknown man.

"Without a doubt. She held the Master Key of the Tower of Summoning and, after asking around, I found out that a young girl with silver hair was seen entering this tower yesterday night. That means she most probably slept here."

"But later in the night, couldn't she have left the tower and gone for an inn?"

"She has the Master Key, why would she bother staying in an inn, of all places? The Private Room has everything she would ever need. Moreover, I made sure to clean and tidy it up every day, the entire room should still be in perfect shape."

This time, a different voice could be heard from behind the door and, rather than an adult woman, it sounded like a young girl was talking. All together, there were three people outside the room: one man and two women; Mira felt that the younger girl's voice was strangely familiar, but couldn't clearly remember to whom it belonged; thus, she chose to open the door and verify it with her own eyes.

"My, so it was you, Litalia *and* Mariana."

After quickly looking up to confirm who the visitors were, Mira glanced at her acquaintances while rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand, removing the last traces of drowsiness from them. At that moment, she made eye contact with the third person; a man dressed in a military uniform standing in wait, one step behind the two women. It was possible to see on his right shoulder an armband of the Kingdom of Arkite.

"And you are…?"

"Mira-sama! Why are you dressed like that!?"

"You! Please look the other way!"

For an instant, Litalia stood there, dazed at the sudden appearance of Mira's figure. The next moment, she rushed to the girl's side and covered that nearly naked body with her own, trying to block it from the man's line of sight.

A girl who was dressed in maid's clothing acted simultaneously, her sapphire, twin-tailed hair fluttering and sparkling while she moved. The maid's intention was to force the military man to do a right about-face; before that, he couldn't take his eyes off from the parts of Mira's body that were visible through her thin robe. That was then followed by a dull sound as he faced the wall and nearly hugged it with his entire figure. Behind him, Litalia already had Mira on her arms and was bringing the young girl back to the room.

"Just what are you doing!?"

With the door finally closed, Mira was let off on the side of the leather sofa. She didn't understand why she was forced to return inside; so, while feeling completely baffled, the girl looked up at Litalia and demanded an answer.

"I should be the one asking that. This may be the Sage's Room, but you can't simply come out dressed like that! There's a possibility that people will come here for a visit!"

While feeling a bit angered, Litalia scolded Mira's choice of attire; as a result, the girl brought her gaze down to look at her clothes, wondering what could be wrong with them. Instantly, she noticed that indeed, the "Robe of the Celestial Maiden" was too transparent to be used as underwear, let alone as everyday clothing.

More often than not, she spent her time inside the Private Room while casually dressed. And right now, all the robes Mira had prepared before going to sleep were only tailored for combat. Even the Sage's Robe she had been wearing yesterday was, in the end, something oriented for battle.

If compared to what she was using now, though, Mira would feel more comfortable in any of those combat clothes. The problem was that she didn't have any intention of wearing outdoor clothing while inside her own room.

"Sorry, but I do not have any clothes for the occasion."

Feeling she couldn't do anything to fix that problem, Mira brazenly said what she thought of it.

"There is something you can use here. At least cover your skin, or you might end up attacked by some lecherous pervert."

After warning Mira, Litalia picked up a red and black robe from the sofa and put it over the little girl's head. She squirmed for a bit and when her face finally appeared through the collar, Mira realized that its size was simply too big for her body. The lower hem was dragging on the ground and not even her fingertips would come out from the sleeves.

But the biggest problem was that the collar of the robe, once a perfect fit for Dunbalf, now was simply too wide for Mira. Its opening reached the area around the young girl's chest, exposing a huge part of it while giving off a

bewitching aura that differed from being simply naked; consequently, that went against Litalia's original intention.

"It is too big."

"Of course, that robe has the right size for Dunbalf. It would never fit your small frame."

While saying that, the maid girl took out one of the bands that tied her hair and used it to fasten the robe's collar. After that, the red, ribbon-like band that now decorated Mira's chest area emphasized even more her little girl appearance.

"This does not suit it at all…"

Mira dropped her shoulders, reacting to the sight of one of her favorite robes losing part of its majestic feeling due to a single ribbon.

"Mira-sama. Are you really Dunbalf-sama's apprentice?"

The maid asked Mira while still adjusting the collar, her eyes fixated on the young girl. It seemed as if she were clinging to a sliver of hope that had suddenly appeared in front of her.

"Indeed. Mariana, I have heard a lot about you."

She was a maid that could easily take one's breath away. Her sapphire-like hair and eyes didn't have a single stain that tainted its color and her physique was similar to Mira's. On her back, two butterfly-like wings slightly swayed. Those same wings, that instead of wind used the mana captured from the atmosphere to fly, were proof of her status as a member of the Fairy Tribe; another characteristic from that race was that its individuals would maintain the appearance of a human child even after reaching adulthood. And that fairy girl was none other than Dunbalf's aide, Mariana.

“I’m so glad… Dunbalf-sama…”

Feeling completely relieved, Mariana’s eyes got slightly damp and tears started flowing down her face, the reddish tinge on her cheeks moistened by that crying. Upon seeing the aide breaking out in tears, Mira became incredibly flustered and, in a semi-unconscious act, held out a hand to that girl’s cheek, unable to endure that scene any longer.

However, right before touching the girl's face, Mira brought that hand back and idly placed it on her chin, having finally grasped the feelings behind Mariana's crying expression. Those tears were shed because of her emotions towards the disappeared Dunbalf; as a result, Mira hesitated to caress the aide's cheek, feeling somewhat guilty for deceiving her.

Being moved by those tears, she considered telling the truth, *at least to Mariana*. However, she dropped that thought. Just how would Mira explain that situation to her? It would be a huge shock to the aide if she knew that her master, Dunbalf, had turned into a young girl. With that in mind, the "apprentice" decided to continue using her fabricated story.

In the past, Mira had only treated Mariana as a mere assistant. But now that the NPC became a real person with a sense of self and even shed tears for Dunbalf, the girl wasn't sure on how to deal with her aide. This was mostly caused by two different emotions that fought within Mira: one was the selfish feeling of not wanting to be rejected by Mariana, who dearly missed her master; the other was the desire to not let the assistant feel worried anymore.

Naturally, as Mira chose the selfish way out of that situation, the words she wanted to say stopped at her throat and slowly disappeared into her silence. While still feeling pathetic for that, the girl stared at the hand that was now hidden by the robe's sleeve and then silently watched the scene in front of her. Responding to what Mariana felt, Litalia whispered "*Indeed, I am also glad,*" while gently wiping the tears from the maid's cheeks.

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"Sorry, I'm fine now."

Just as Mariana had finally sorted out her feelings and calmed down, a familiar rhythmical sound could be heard inside the room.

"Hello? Litalia-sama, Mariana-sama. Are you finished yet?"

Following it, after a short while came the muffled voice of the military man, the person who had been forced by Mariana to turn around and face the walls; once again, with renewed composure, he restarted the absolute mission assigned to him by the King himself.

"Yes, we are leaving now."

With that reply, Litalia then returned her attention to the one who was the original goal of her visit, Mira. Currently, the little girl was shaking the sleeves that covered her hands while stretching her body on the sofa.

"So, what does he want? I see that he is a soldier from the Kingdom's army."

"Oh, right. Yesterday after we met, I humbly reported that matter to King Solomon and he instantly wanted to meet you, Mira-sama. That gentleman outside is an envoy from the capital sent to pick you up."

"Hmm, Solomon… I see..."

The King of Arkite, Solomon. He was Dunbalf's best friend, the player who invited the Summoning Expert to his newly founded nation. Compared with Luminaria, Solomon's friendship with Mira started much earlier.

However, neither Litalia nor Mariana knew about that, so they thought that the casual tone used by the young girl to address the King had a different meaning. It would have been considered a huge disrespect to their leader if one were to use his Solomon name without the "King" title or the correct honorifics; the assistants, though, simply treated Mira's shameless behavior as a charming trait of a rebellious adolescent. Not only that, the way she talked was so similar to Dunbalf that, in their mind, it evoked the image of a child mimicking her parent's actions. Yet, those thoughts were unknown to Mira.

"Luminaria-sama is also in the capital, so I believe you can meet her after your audience with the King."

"Oh, good. Then, we should not make them wait any more."

If Solomon was really there, then he would probably be in the same situation as Luminaria: a player stuck in this new reality. After realizing that, Mira got up from the sofa to respond to the summons; an act in vain, as her movements towards the door were stopped instantly by Litalia and Mariana.

"Stop right there, Mira-sama."

"Hmpf, what now?"

"Surely, you are dressed in a robe now, but you still cannot go out like that."

What Litalia meant was that the hem of the robe was dragging on the ground and its sleeves still covered Mira's hands. In short, the size of that clothing was still a problem for the girl.

"Please stand still, Mira-sama. I will fix it really quick."

To Mira, Litalia's eyes seemed to show a suspicious gleam but, in the end, the aide's hands didn't leave a single opening for escape and captured her. What followed next was a scene where a joyful Litalia helped Mariana, who produced a great number of ribbons out of nowhere, to adjust the robe, rolling up its sleeves and raising the hem. Mira still tried to somehow oppose them, but ended up overwhelmed by their splendid coordination, her clothes finally decorated with the ribbons.

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"Now the only problem left is the underwear."

"Exactly."

Having roughly finished with the outside part of Mira's clothing, the assistants remembered what had happened earlier, when she came out of the room wearing nothing but the "Robe of the Celestial Maiden"; they then pondered about what to use for undergarments since that one-piece, now under the remodeled robe, didn't serve as a proper underwear. Upon hearing

the only word she wanted to avoid at all costs, the girl who had been treated as a dress-up doll felt a terrible chill run down her entire spine.

Although the robe Mira was wearing now covered her skin, it was just that; her current state could still be considered as being naked. She also didn't remember ever wearing any kind of underwear since arriving in that world. So, to sum it up, Mira was currently both pantyless and braless.

Incidentally, there was no way that the two assistants would allow the girl in front of them to go out in that state. After considering her options for a bit, Mariana made up her mind about something.

"I know exactly what you can use. Please wait a minute, I'll be right back."

Stating that, she opened the bathroom's door and entered the place where just yesterday night Mira had defiantly charged in. A few moments later, the maid came back with something in her hands. Even though the younger girl couldn't identify what it was at glance, it looked like a garment made of white cloth. Still, for some reason, Mira felt she had seen something similar before.

"Well, this should be a proper fit. Now, come here, Mira-sama."

In spite of being the one who asked the girl to move, Litalia ended up using her own hands to lift Mira without any effort; followed by that, the little girl was practically forced to wear the item Mariana had brought with her, receiving a simple "*Excuse me,*" before the act. In the end, Mira had no say at all there.

When the girl finally looked at the underwear the maid put on her, she saw something that resembled short pants and remembered what it was. Called "bloomers", they were a kind of underclothing often used in the Gothic Lolita fashion.

"Why… why was something like this inside my ro—err, inside my Master's room…?"

The first thing that came into Mira's mind were those questioning words that, somehow, escaped from her throat. Even though there existed, indeed, underwear equipments in the game, Dunbalf was never the kind of person who had the hobby of collecting women's underclothing. Not only that, but Mira didn't remember ever bringing that kind of thing to her room. Within the place, she had, at most, a rainbow-colored loincloth that Dunbalf had obtained from the River Climbing Festival.

"The bathroom here in Dunbalf-sama's room is so big I can't help but enjoy it."

"Indeed, it is something splendid, but..."

"It's my spare underwear."

"Oh.... oh right…"

At that instant, Mira lost all her will to fight back and majestically hung her head in shame, having finally become a complete dress-up doll.

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Mira’s robe was now decorated with countless ribbons. Its hem had been folded to make it look like a flared skirt and the sleeves, also enveloped in the same kind of ornament, were left in a moderately loose state.

At first glance, Mira could be easily mistaken for the likes of a magical girl; but the ones who accomplished such feat, Litalia and Mariana, simply nodded to each other, satisfied with the result. The young girl’s expression, however, was the complete opposite of the assistants’, displaying the most bitter smile she managed to produce.

“Well then, Mira-sama, shall we go?”

“The envoy outside is waiting.”

“Not while I am wearing these clothes.”

“We cannot make him wait any more.”

“Leave me out of that. You were the ones who decided on your own to do this with the robe.”

“That was because of the clothes you were wearing before.”

“Yes, but you did not have to go all the way with...”

Having found no way to win against those two, Mira gave up and brought her gaze down to the magical girl’s clothing she was wearing now—only to let out a splendid sigh as it didn’t fit her robe at all.

“Alright, let’s go.”

Leading the way, Litalia opened the door and there, outside, was the uniformed man standing in wait, just like the first time Mira had seen him. His cheeks, however, were somewhat red.

When the young girl left the Private Room, Mariana appeared behind her and calmly closed the door. On one hand, the man was surprised by the sudden change that Mira had underwent, when her figure clad in a robe full of ribbons completely filled his view; on the other hand, the image of that same girl wearing nothing but a skin-colored one-piece resurfaced in his mind and made him remember what he felt at that time.Finally, being the first one to notice it, Mariana shoot him a glare that could even silence a dragon.

The man, who had been standing upright all the time, appeared to flinch a little from that gaze. Then, after slightly clearing his throat, he placed his right hand on his chest and bowed, in a sort of greeting. It was a style of salute used by the armed forces of the Kingdom of Arkite, but at the same time Mira’s expression became strangely stiff.

When Arkite was still in its early days and was about to fight its first war, everyone thought it would be a hopeless fight. However, the moment they triumphed, the victorious players’ mood was in perfect form and, together, they came up with that salute. In other words, it was something created in the heat of that moment.

Of course, as Mira clearly recalled, in the middle of the atmosphere and

mood of the war, the scene of all soldiers doing the salute together was a sight to behold. But right now, when it was only one person doing it, Mira couldn't help but give off a forced smile.

"Pleased to meet you. I am Garrett Astol, serving as the vice-leader of the Arkite Kingdom's Mobile Infantry Force."

"And I am Mira."

"Dunbalf-sama's apprentice, Mira-sama, right? I am here to bring a message from his Majesty, the King of Arkite."

After Mira gave a short reply, Garrett continued without any change in his attitude.

"I have already instructed her on what the message was. Mira-sama has gladly accepted the invite for an audience with the King."

While peering into the man's face, who didn't seem to want to lock eyes with her, Litalia spoke about his main objective.

"Oohh, is that so? Thank you very much. Well then, I have a carriage prepared in front of the tower, so let us leave without delay."

Having finished saying that, Garrett's expression revealed once again very small traces of seriousness. Then, as if trying to run away from there, he guided Mira to the front of the vehicle.

"Please take care on the way to the capital."

"Mira-sama, if possible in the future, would you mind telling us about Dunbalf-sama?"

"Right, of course. I will make sure to do it the next time we meet, then."

"Thank you so much. I will be waiting."

"Good, see you later."

Mira lightly waved her hand in a farewell to the two assistants and boarded the carriage, her mind now troubled by the need to create and expand a convincing story about Dunbalf's disappearance.

Chapter 8

The paved road that started outside of Silver Horn and led to the capital of the kingdom, Lunatic Lake, was surrounded by a forest. And currently, a single carriage was rushing through it; the wagon's wheels and horses echoing in the distance.

Nicknamed "Thousand-mile Carriage", that two-horse vehicle was only used in urgent matters to carry VIP personnel. That very fact revealed just how much King Solomon wanted to see Mira, considering that simply picking up guests for a meeting wasn't the original purpose of that kind of transport. The girl herself, even with all the shaking, was greatly enjoying that first experience of traveling in a carriage, exclaiming, "*Wow, this is incredible! It is so fast!*" while looking at the moving scenery from the window.

When it was still a game, she could simply use the Floating Continent to travel between long distances. That option, however, wasn't available anymore as the System entry in the menu was gone and, with it, the command to use the item. But even if that command were there, Mira had doubts on whether the Floating Continent would work or not in that world. Nevertheless, just as she didn't want to worry about her current situation as a girl, Mira also wanted to forget any problem related to the game turning into reality, so she had chosen to enjoy herself for now.

Sadly for her, that joy was disturbed less than two hours after departing from Silver Horn. The young girl started to look a little fidgety and her eyes were searching all around her; an effect of the same physiological phenomenon she had challenged the night before. And this time it was especially bad, as the continued shaking in the carriage made the situation around her abdomen feel increasingly dangerous. Finally, believing she couldn't endure it anymore, Mira snuck her head out to look at the coachman seat.

"Hey, is there any WCs around here?"

"*Double cheese*…? I… don't think so… is it some sort of food? We'll be arriving shortly at Silver Wand, so you can just tell me what it is and I'll gladly pick it up for you."

"No, I am not talking about that… well, if you were to ask me, I would like something made with pheasant meat…."

"Pheasant… oh, chicken meat? Now that you mention it, we still didn't have breakfast. Alright, leave it to me. We'll be a little late for that meal, but we can finally eat after reaching the city."

"Ahhh, forget what I just said! I am talking about *WCs*!!"

"Hummm…. I'm terribly sorry… I don't think I've seen such food being sold in Silver Wand..."

"This is not about food! I am looking for a *bathroom, toilet, restroom* or whatever! Aaahh… stop here! I will find a good place behind a tree to just do it!"

"Ehh…? Ah… aah! That was what you meant!?[4]"

If Mira were in her old body, she would probably be able to hold it for a bit longer; however, that wasn't the case now. When her young body started complaining about it, the girl's instincts warned her that she would soon end up wetting herself.

While impatiently poking Garrett's back countless times and pointing at a proper spot in the woods, Mira urged the military coachman to stop. Promptly, the two horses simultaneously started to slow down their pace. But in the end, she couldn't wait for them to stop completely and simply jumped out of the carriage, rushing for an appropriate point under a tree while rolling up the hem of her robe.

When the girl finally saw the bloomers that covered her lower body, her hands came to a stop. The legs, though, didn't follow suit and kept fidgeting, her feet restlessly stomping the ground in a weird manner.

(Just how do I take these off!!?)

As if mocking Mira's rushed efforts, the undergarment she had been forced to wear blocked her from relieving herself. Simply put, the girl didn't know how to safely remove it; an obvious problem, considering that not only it was her first time wearing such a kind of underwear, but also that she wasn't the one who put it on herself.

The bloomers didn't have any sort of strap or band to fasten them around her hips, but even if she tried to pull that undergarment down, it would stop at her hips. The situation was so bad it got to the point where Mira almost resolved herself to tear everything off. Yet, she had to drive away those thoughts, as the girl couldn't possibly destroy something lent to her. Incidentally, more than anything else, she didn't want to wet herself in those borrowed bloomers, a fact that only aggravated her impatience.

Mira even tried to stretch the sides of the underwear with her fingers while pulling down, only for it to end in another failure. Then, when her whole body felt like it was drenched in sweat, she happened to look at the portions of underclothing that her slender fingers were touching. That made the girl smile bitterly at her own panicked reaction from earlier, wondering why she didn't realize something so obvious about the underwear.

Right around the lace, on the waist part of the bloomers, was a single string tied in a bow knot. If Mira had the presence of mind to think carefully and analyse her situation, she would have found it in an instant, without any problem. However, with so many "first" experiences related to that new body of hers occupying her head, it was natural that the girl's mind would forget to consider something so simple.

Once she understood how it worked, removing the underwear wasn't a big deal anymore. And since Mira already felt she was an inch away from reaching her limits, she hurriedly untied the string, brought the bloomers down to her knees and squatted. What followed next was a supreme feeling of freedom as the girl greatly relieved herself.

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After doing that act for the second time already, Mira was convinced that she had perfectly mastered her own body and its needs; a short-lived thought, as she quickly became aware of the blunder she had just committed. When the young girl finished her business and stood up to bring her bloomers back in place, she remembered that women were supposed to wipe themselves there.

(How am I going to do it here?)

She didn't have anything ready to use for wiping, not to mention any toilet paper. Just in case, Mira even tried to open her Item Box; but other than food items, there were only refining and raw materials inside. When she closed the menu, the girl started looking around for any sort of thing that could work as a substitute for the paper.

In the middle of the forest, it was possible to hear the soft whispers of the animals; some of those revealed by the sunlight as it shone through the treetops. Finally, displaying their beauty on a clearing in the thick grass was an incredible variety of flowers. Then, after finishing that brief visual search around the place filled with nature's gifts, Mira picked up a white petal from one of the huge flowers there, squatted once again and used it to wipe herself.

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"Hey, sorry for having you wait all this time."

Sounding somewhat spirited, Mira called out from behind Garrett's back, just as he was greatly enjoying himself while caressing the horses' fur.

"Oh no, it was my fault for not realizing what you meant earlier. I'm terribly sorry for that."

Garrett reflected on what had happened before and quickly wore a serious expression on his face, subsequently lowering his head in an apology.

"Oh do not worry, really. I should have expressed myself better."

The girl's cheerful expression reflected just how pleased she was with the mental growth she had achieved, in regards to her own body; consequently, upon seeing that, Garrett felt relieved and opened the door to the carriage for her.

"For now, let's stop by Silver Wand to have our breakfast."

"Alright, I am in your care."

Finally, as Mira got inside the vehicle, the military man made sure to check the horses' harnesses and then jumped on the coach seat.

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About one hour had passed since the “WC” incident and the carriage was already approaching the City of Silver Wand without any problems. That last statement, however, only applied to the coach and not to the person inside it; currently, Mira was suffering through something she had never imagined would happen.

(What the hell is this!? Why is it stinging!? That hurts!!)

Mira was rolling on top of her seat in the vehicle, writhing in pain as a burning sensation she’d never felt before spread through her private parts. At first, the girl thought it was some kind of disorder peculiar to women, but as the pain gradually became unbearable, she finally decided to remove her bloomers to investigate what was happening there. And then the realization hit her.

(So it was poison... or something similar…)

The answer she arrived at was: the flower petal she had used to wipe herself was poisonous. Mira couldn’t think of anything else that would’ve done that; there was no way that those symptoms would appear exclusively for women.

After guessing the cause, the young girl opened her Item Box, trying to find anything that could help her. As she looked through the various items she had in stock, Mira finally took out a specific medicine that had caught her sight.

Called『All-Purpose Salve』, that recovery item was able to heal abnormal conditions and, to a certain extent, some injuries suffered by the player. While feeling a bit of reluctance to do it, the little girl crouched in the corner of her seat, looking almost curled up, and wished, with all her heart, that the salve she had just applied would show its effectiveness.

Soon after that, her prayers were answered and the poisonous flower’s effects were healed by the item’s anti-poison properties. Feeling relieved over that, Mira lay down on the seat, muttering a few words in response to everything she had to go through, “*No more… please....*”

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Approximately ten minutes after the flower mischief, the carriage slowly came to a stop; followed by that, Garrett’s face appeared inside the vehicle.

“Mira-sama, we have arrived at Silver Wand. Shall we head to a restaurant? Or do you want me to go and buy something for you?”

Mira thought about her options for a bit and...

“Since we are here anyway, I choose the restaurant. Let us go together.”

Usually, she would’ve asked for the second option, but the girl ended up choosing the first one. To begin with, up until now most of her necessities were satisfied by the use of Virtual Reality; it was something so natural to her life that she rarely walked outside, under the sky. Mira had been living in the age when even work would be done via VR, much less shopping for goods, as they

could be easily shipped to the person's house.

However, the current world was different. The girl had walked in a forest, met with other people and even felt the shaking inside of a carriage. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that it was the first time she experienced something so real and distinct from the convenient life she had been living. And Mira was starting to enjoy everything there, even those same inconveniences, as she considered them essential to expand a person's mind.

Motivated by that thought, the girl jumped out of the coach and looked at the vast, blue sky, determined to experience that brand world with all her might.

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Silver Wand. It was a town situated in a valley close to a mountain range, standing right between Lunatic Lake and Silver Horn. The city was mainly known for the work done by its inhabitants in the fields of agriculture, forestry, mining and others from that same area of expertise. It also worked as a stopping point, connecting together the capital of the kingdom and the largest military power of the country; because of that, another thing that flourished and made Silver Wand bigger than ever was the trade business.

Currently, Mira was in the parking lot of the commercial district of the city. On the vast lawn there, various carriages were parked and lined up against the stables. Usually, if a person wanted to leave their vehicle there, they were required to pay a fee; it wasn't the case for the Thousand-mile Carriage, though, as that coach could park in the area reserved for the kingdom's vehicles. In short, that special place could only be used by the royalty, nobility and VIPs to park their own carriages, free of charge.

As a result, it was perfectly natural for that parking lot to draw the attention of everyone in the vicinity. And especially now, the populace's gaze was fixed on the young girl that had suddenly appeared, bringing about an incomparable atmosphere with her.

With eyes that revealed complete confidence on herself and a beautiful silver hair that shone as she moved, Mira's pale figure, clad in a robe full of ribbons, stunned everyone who gazed at her. Or rather, simply exchanging looks with that girl was enough to make them forget how to speak.

Mira, trying to relax herself, did a long stretch while looking up at the sky, enjoying the scenery of the surrounding mountains. From the corner of her eye, she noticed a bird flying freely and chased after it with her sight, only to get distracted again by many others that suddenly took flight out of various spots in the florest. As her eyes followed them, the girl herself didn't notice, but she kept spinning her own body to keep up with all the nature around her.

While able to somehow hear Garrett finishing the formalities from parking there, Mira brought her gaze down after finally noticing the strange mood that had been set in her surroundings; in order to not meet eyes with the others, she turned to face the patch of grass she was standing on.

(They are looking at me. It must be because of the clothes… I am sure they are laughing and thinking of how weird these are...)

Her current appearance completely resembled that of an anime character, and was definitely at odds with what would be considered fit for someone living in a fantasy world. But that was just the impression Mira had and, as she tried to run from everyone else's gaze, Garrett finally finished his talks, returning to the girl's side.

"My apologies for the wait, Mira-sama. Now, what would you like to eat?"

Not letting go of that opportunity, Mira listened to the military man's question while hiding behind his larger frame and replied with a simple "*What do you suggest?*"; the only thing she wanted right now was to leave that place, so anywhere else would do. With that in mind, she urged Garrett to move by pushing his back.

"Well then, let me guide you to one of my favorite restaurants."

That scene, of an impatient young girl pestering the military man for something, was a lovely sight to see, simply because they closely resembled a parent and his daughter together.

After leaving the parking lot, Mira and Garrett went through an alley from the main street, finally arriving in front of a building that served as both a restaurant and an inn.

"Here we are. It's a bit small but I can guarantee that the food is delicious."

The girl looked up at the wooden establishment. Painted in big letters on the swing door was the place's name, 『The Corner of Twilight』. Apparently, that western-style entrance allowed one to easily perceive what was happening inside the shop; however, because of Mira's height, from outside she could only see its ceiling.

"Oh my, how rude. It's been such a long time and the first thing you do after coming back is to call our place, '*a bit small*,' huh..."

All of a sudden, the two heard a woman's voice from behind them. When they turned their heads, a woman in around her twenties was standing right there, holding with both hands a basket full of goods *and glaring at Garrett*. Despite her seemingly plain appearance, given by the chestnut hair that stuck out of her kerchief and reached her shoulders, she was a beautiful woman altogether. Embroidered on her white and blue pinafore was the name 『The Corner of Twilight』, revealing that she worked at the restaurant.

"Why, hello there, Shelly. Long time no see."

"And put '*long*' in that. Geez, you should visit us more often… wait a moment, who's that cute little kid with you!?"

After letting her basket down, Shelly moved her sight to Garrett's side and took notice of the young girl that was trying to look up at her; instantly after, as if it was completely natural, the woman placed her hand on Mira's head and started rubbing it.

"Wha—! Hey, stop doing this!"

As she brushed off Shelly's hand, the girl concluded that the shop worker in front of her was yet another one of those that would only treat her as a kid. For that reason, Mira chose to hide behind the military man, using his body as a shield.

"Oh my goodness, she's soooo lovely!!"

The way that little girl acted, suspiciously observing Shelly from behind Garrett's back, only made that woman's maternal instincts grow stronger.

"She is Mira-sama."

"Hmmm, I see... so your name is Mira… what a cute name, Mira-chaaan~"

The shop worker's expression softened even further as she slowly shortened her distance between Mira.

"Shelly, that's enough, Mira-sama doesn't seem to be liking this."

"Yes! He is right!"

While still hiding behind Garrett, the young girl expressed her agreement to what the man had said. Although that scene fueled Shelly's outburst even more, she didn't have any intention of being hated by that cute kid in front of her; because of that, the woman decided to restrain herself with all her might.

"Hey, hey, Garrett... what are you and Mira-chan doing together?"

Trying to fix her mellowed expression, Shelly straightened her face and looked at Garrett with inquisitive eyes.

"I'm in the middle of escorting her to Lunatic Lake, but we still didn't have breakfast."

"And then you decided to come here. Well done."

The shop worker picked up her basket of goods and opened the swing door, guiding both customers inside.

"Okay then, since the counter is still empty you'll have to wait for a bit… hum? Mira-chan? Are you still mad at me?"

Feeling a bit of regret, Shelly observed Mira, who was still wary of her while walking closely behind Garrett.

“Oh no, I don’t think that Mira-sama is the kind of person to get mad at something so trivial.”

And he was absolutely right, the girl wasn’t angry at all; she just felt terribly embarrassed by being treated like a child. However, after seeing the

desolate expression the woman had on her face, Mira moved out from the military man's back as her feelings of guilt won over the desire to stay hidden.

"At least do not treat me like a kid, alright?"

The girl had only said a few words. But to Shelly, they were just the words of a kid trying to act like an adult. As a result, this time she succumbed to the urge of hugging Mira with everything she had.

"I can't take your cuteness anymore, Mira-chan!!"

As soon as the woman said that, she threw out both her shopping basket and reasoning altogether, jumping at the girl in front of her. Then, upon receiving such an honest display of love, the now tightly squeezed Mira couldn't force herself to shake Shelly off; "*Oh well, whatever… suit yourself...*" was the only thing she managed to mutter as she sighed in defeat.

Chapter 9

Having finished her meal at *The Corner of Twilight*, Mira was now appeasing her thirst with a *Berry au Lait* given by Shelly. The sourness of berries was perfectly mixed with the sweetness of milk, causing the little girl to relax her stiff expression from before; and of course, there was no way that the shop worker would ignore such a moment, resulting in a series of "*You're so cuuute Mira-chan!!*" to every little thing Mira did. Was she already desensitized to it? Or did the girl simply give up? She didn't really know which one was right but, in the end, Mira let Shelly do as she pleased without treating the woman with scorn.

Meanwhile, Garrett was cheerfully watching them as he chatted with Varga, who was the manager of that place and Shelly's father. "*So, when are you going to take my daughter's hand and marry her?*" he asked to the military man in jest, even though his eyes seemed serious; not knowing how to reply, Garrett could only display a wry smile. Actually, that exact exchange was one of the reasons for his sparse visits to the lodging.

The man named Varga had a short hair with the same brown color as Shelly's. The extremely fine cuisine made by him contrasted with his imposing body, forged by all the work he had done in the mountains.

Now, for the meal the two customers had, it had been Garrett's idea to ask the manager for a sandwich of roasted chicken and vegetables; obviously, it was because he remembered how Mira had talked about "*pheasant meat*" in the carriage. Then, as dessert, Shelly brought a pudding tart for the young girl to eat. Both the sandwich and the tart were made by Varga and, naturally, overflowed with his obsession in delivering the best taste and appearance to the client. Mira could only eat such delicious food because of Garrett's decision to recommend the restaurant, in spite of how he had to deal with the inevitable jokes coming from the manager.

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"Well then, I guess it's about time we leave."

Garrett had been waiting for Mira to finish her *Berry au Lait*. As soon as she did that, he quickly drank the rest of his herbal tea and rose up from his chair.

"Whaaat? Come on, stay here for just a bit longer, pleeease!"

Shelly started pouting and complaining, removing her attention from Mira for the first time since they had entered the place.

"Sadly, we can't do that. I'm still in the midst of work."

While answering the pleading woman, Garrett took out his wallet and dropped the correct amount of money on the counter.

"Indeed, let us go."

"Ahhnn, even you, Mira-chan?"

That moment of distraction was the perfect chance for the girl to slip through Shelly's arms. Upon seeing Mira's back as she fled from her grasp, the shop worker suddenly felt terribly lonely and started picking up the coins left on the table.

"Thank you very much for the food, it was delicious. There'll be a next time, okay?"

"It was really great."

"I hope you really come again. And the same goes to the little lady. I'll always have a *Berry au Lait* especially prepared for you."

Even while carefully tidying up the robe decorated with ribbons, Mira reacted to the drink's name.

"Hmm, maybe I should pay you a visit when ***that lady*** over there is absent."

She just had to think for a few seconds to give that answer, suggesting the minimum requirement for her presence in the restaurant.

"Mira-chan, you meanie!!"

"I think that right before noon should be fine, since that's the time when she goes out for shopping."

"Ohoho, I will remember that."

"Not you too, daad!"

It looked a bit forced, but Shelly tumbled over the counter at the sudden realization that no one there would be her ally.

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After leaving *The Corner of Twilight*, Mira and Garrett returned to the parking lot; and before any of the curious glances from earlier assaulted her again, the girl quickly got inside the carriage. In front of the vehicle, the two horses seemed to be in high spirits after being treated by the caretakers. As if trying to show that their fatigue from the trip was now gone, they neighed, full of energy, when the harnesses were equipped on them. Then, as soon as the carriage started moving, Mira directed her sight to the window, carefully observing the townscape of Silver Wand.

(So this city was created during the thirty years I was gone, huh...)

The girl didn't have any memories of a town named "Silver Wand" around that place. With her heart pounding in excitement, moved by the freshness of the scenery outside, she realized just how real was the period of time she'd lost in that world.

Finally, after leaving the main street, the carriage entered the forest road outside of the city. It was mostly a straight path and, as the travelers climbed

it, the road would eventually lead to a certain place.

An incredibly high cliff, that almost looked like some kind of wall, appeared right in front of them; imposing, some parts of it were reinforced with countless blocks of stone. And it was inside there that the public road continued, entering through a large, semicircle-shaped hole placed in the middle of that crag.

As soon as Mira, who was riding in the coach, thought they'd arrived at a clearing in the forest, the scenery outside the window changed and suddenly lost some of its brightness, surprising her. Now, she could only see stone walls everywhere while they moved; the light from the entrance gradually disappearing as the vehicle followed the road.

After the girl took into consideration the ringing that assaulted her ears and the condition of the place around her, she reached the conclusion that they were now inside a tunnel. Mira, however, didn't remember that kind of passage in the mountains existing between Lunatic Lake and Silver Horn; puzzled, she poked her head out to ask the coachman.

"This is incredible. I never thought a tunnel like this one would exist here. When was it built?"

"Oh, the *Benedict Tunnel*? If I'm not mistaken, I heard that thirty years ago Solomon-sama ordered its construction and after five years it was completed."

"Oho, so that is what happened..."

(That guy, I see he is really doing his job properly.)

Since Mira already had her head outside of the carriage, she used that opportunity to look at the path ahead, observing the various lamps that illuminated the inside of the tunnel; created with the help of Abstractionism, they were lined up at equal intervals on the walls. The thought of Solomon doing such a great, king-like work made the girl chuckle to herself.

Lunatic Lake and Silver Horn were separated by a mountain range, so traveling between both cities was extremely inconvenient. Consequently, it wouldn't be unusual to say that the passage they were now using was indispensable, considering that the most common means of transportation was a horse-drawn vehicle.

Then, another thing that left Mira in deep thought was a specific piece of information that Garrett had just said; the King had ordered the construction of the tunnel ***thirty years ago***. It meant that Solomon had been, indeed, living in that world since Dunbalf's disappearance. With that, the only thing left for her to verify was if the player and his avatar were still the same person.

In the end, the young girl was thankful that, once they crossed the mountain range after reaching the exit of that tunnel, their arrival at the capital of the kingdom wouldn't be that late. She then returned to her seat and just looked at the monotonous scenery that appeared from outside her window.

During that time, the dull view of stone walls and lamps mingled with the echoing of horseshoes and wheels hitting the ground. On top of that, there was

also the cradle-like swaying inside the carriage and Mira's own feeling of satiety from the meal she had in Silver Wand; all of those factors contributed perfectly for the girl to start nodding off, her soft breathing barely audible while she moved her head back and forth, drowsily.

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A magnificent blue sky spread all over in front of the carriage after said vehicle finally left the tunnel. In the distance, it was possible to see a certain crescent-shaped lake that directly reflected the clean color from the heavens. Then, adjacent to that mass of water and placed near its center was the Arkite Castle, home of the leader of the nation, King Solomon. Lastly, spreading from the vicinity of that building and occupying the land around the lake was the Capital of the Kingdom of Arkite, Lunatic Lake.

After leaving behind the forest that was at the foot of the mountain, the coach carrying Mira was now on a descending journey at full speed, running through a rugged and faintly darkened plateau. Mixed in with the vegetation from the grasslands were numerous rock surfaces; occasionally, from some of the crevices, small animals that lurked there would show their faces and follow the vehicle with their eyes, curious as to what it was.

When the sun reached a certain height, its light started seeping inside the carriage, forcing the girl to lazily wake up. While using the back of her hands to rub her sleepy eyes, Mira placed herself on the other side of the seat, in order to escape the strong brightness coming from the outside. She then let out a small yawn, while stretching her body, and placed an arm on the window frame of the vehicle, resting her chin on it.

From that place, she kept watching the beautiful and far away scenery that slowly moved behind, contrasting with the faster pace of the landscape right around her. Afterwards, feeling a bit thirsty for the first time since she had left the restaurant, Mira took out a bottle of *Apple au Lait* and brought it closer to her lips, having a sip from time to time. While enjoying the drink, she also felt thankful for the wind that made her hair flutter, as it flowed in from the window and gently brushed her body, still slightly hot from sleeping under the sunlight for a small period of time.

"Hmm, I see that the capital has grown bigger too."

After switching her attention to the front of the carriage and gazing at her destination in the distance, as soon as Mira recognized the huge townscape that bordered the crescent lake, she couldn't help but speak a line in admiration. From the rugged plateau overlooking Lunatic Lake, it was possible to see that both the capital and the big mass of water were encircled by walls, their shape now resembling that of a complete full moon.

When the girl compared that city with the one from her memories, it was considerably larger than before; and what caught her attention were several structures that greatly stood out amidst the other buildings in the capital. Promptly, Mira once again moved to speak with the coachman, her face

appearing behind him.

"Hey, what is that huge building in the city?"

"Huge building…?"

She used her slender fingers to point at the city while asking Garrett a question. Then, stimulated by a glimpse of the girl's cheerful expression, the military man tried to verify the place she was indicating with her hand. The first thing that would enter someone's field of view and could be considered a "large structure" was the Arkite Castle, enshrined at the heart of Lunatic Lake. However, Garrett believed that Mira wouldn't ask such elementary question, so he searched for other sizable buildings, identifying four in the end.

Inside the city, with the Royal Castle as starting point, there were four facilities placed near the walls that greatly stood out, one in each of the four cardinal directions. Everyone who lived in the capital knew what the buildings were.

"Ohh, are you talking about the *Tools of the Five Elements*?"

"Is that what you call them?"

"Yes, those facilities are the result of Solomon-sama's project to restructure Lunatic Lake with his *Five Elements Plan,* and were built at around the same time as the Benedict Tunnel. In order of construction, there is the Waste Treatment Plant on the south; then, if you look to the east you will see the Arkite Academy; the Drug Research Institute is located on the north side of the city; finally, on the west, we have the Craftsmen Workshop Bureau. Together, they are called the 'Tools of the Five Elements.' "

"Oho... now I get it."

That naming sense was based on the "five elements" principle of the Chinese philosophy, like in the Feng Shui: wood, fire, earth, metal and water. It was similar to what could be seen in Kyoto, and Solomon actually managed to pull it off with his policies for the capital; Mira couldn't help but agree that her friend was exactly the kind of person who would do that.

Solomon's love for the Feng Shui started because of his experiences within the game. He became so engrossed in it that he studied the art with great zeal and would happily talk about it with Mira—or rather, Dunbalf—at every opportunity. The sight of her best friend coming in and reading her luck related to money, work and many other topics was still fresh in the girl's memories.

Having grasped the meaning of those buildings, Mira returned to her seat and, once again, positioned her arm against the window frame and placed her chin on the hand she had just put there. Soon after, the young girl took small sips of the *Apple au Lait* bottle that had been opened earlier and gazed at the scenery outside; from time to time, it was possible to see a group of migratory birds flocking together, calmly flying in the skies.

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Under the great weather, the silhouette of a carriage could be seen moving through the peaceful plateau; and swaying back and forth inside the vehicle was Mira, with certain thoughts welling up inside her. There were many occasions when bewilderment was the only thing she felt, but if one were to ask the girl about her emotions right now, she would probably give a different answer. Simply put, it was a feeling not too different from "happiness" that gradually occupied her mind.

When Mira finished her drink, she put the empty bottle in a corner of the coach, near her feet, and retrieved two more vials of *Apple au Lait* from her Item Box. She then approached the front of the vehicle and quietly revealed her face to the coachman, offering one bottle of the beverage to him.

"Thank you very much, Mira-sama."

In a scene resembling that of a superior giving his subordinate a cup of coffee, Garrett gladly accepted the drink given to him.

"So, why did you join the army?"

Mira was just in the mood to talk about something, so she casually inquired him on his motives for enlisting.

"Hmm, my reasons for joining the army, huh..."

While muttering, "*Oh, that's right... I...,*" Garrett brought the *Apple au Lait* to his mouth and then, by reflex, exclaimed about how delicious it was, the exquisite taste of the drink making the military man feel like his entire soul had been healed. The girl simply agreed with him as she revealed a triumphant expression on her face.

"I think it's because of my father."

"I see... does your father serve in the military too?"

"Yes. This is a bit embarrassing but, I wanted to be just like him. He is the First Squad Captain of the Order of the Magic Clothed Knights and I grew up watching everything he did."

When Garrett answered, his eyes gently shone, full of admiration for his parent.

"That is quite the respect for one's own father. I am sure he would be delighted if he heard that."

"Oh no, I couldn't possibly say that in front of him, it would be too embarrassing. Please, Mira-sama, let's keep this conversation a secret."

The coachman said so while placing a finger on his lips, his face displaying a very serene look. Indeed, the feelings for his father came from the bottom of his heart and Mira could easily grasp that fact. Yet, to a certain extent, the gesture Garrett just did could be seen as him trying to warn a little kid to not do anything bad; Mira chose to forgive him, however, since her own heart was now filled with warmth.

"Your father must be a really fortunate person."

Having your son think about you that much was an incredibly great

blessing, so the girl couldn't help but feel jealous of Garrett's father.

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. So much that if I were someone else's father, I would have liked a respectful son just like you."

"Well, in Mira-sama's case, you would be a 'mother' rather than a 'father,' right?'"

"Ahhh, that is right..."

When the military man pointed out that fact to Mira, she hesitated for a bit before answering with a bitter smile on her face.

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A mother rather than a father. She didn't think about it at all, but now that the question appeared, the girl had to agree that if she were to ever become a parent, she would be a *mother* and not a father.

Mira didn't hate kids; rather, there were many occasions when Kagami thought about what he would do if he had children, what kind of games they would play together and how he would name them. Those memories, though, came from a really distant past—a fact the girl was sadly reminded of.

Even without becoming a parent, she realized that watching over kids would still have some meaning to her. Nonetheless, Mira decided to only think about that matter when the time required it; for now, she would simply enjoy her new life in that completely new body. Then, after reaching such a conclusion, the girl finished drinking her second bottle of *Apple au Lait*.

Chapter 10

The carriage transporting Mira gradually decreased its pace and finally came to a halt in front of an imposing, giant gate. When they were still traveling on the plateau, only the walls that encircled Lunatic Lake could be seen from that high place. However, as the travelers got closer and looked at the city from below, they were greeted with a visage that splendidly embodied the meaning of Arkite Kingdom, a country that focused on its national defense.

While leaning her body on the window of the vehicle, the young girl looked up at the city walls and exclaimed, "*Wow, they got really big…,*" as her heart pounded in excitement; an obvious reaction, caused by the great disparity between the current capital and the one from thirty years ago, still fresh within her memories. Mira then wondered just how different the place inside was, considering its outside was like that now, and started looking forward to all the changes undergone by the world during her absence.

Currently, the Thousand-mile Carriage was positioned in front of a gate that wasn't the main entrance to the capital; rather, the enormous doors blocked the way to a straight road that led directly to the Royal Castle. Garrett exchanged a few words with its gatekeeper and, soon after, the huge gates began opening with a deep, dull sound.

Then, when the soldier serving as gatekeeper raised a hand over his head and made a signal, the ringing of a bell that sat atop the gates resounded in the skies. In response, another bell started echoing in the distance, sounding almost as if it tried to do a follow-up every time time first one rang. From afar, they announced the arrival of the very special carriage Mira was in.

Although it had five other lanes crossing its path, the dedicated road to the castle didn't have a single pedestrian walking on it. That was due to the fact that each of its intersecting points had been temporarily closed, as soldiers holding black and yellow rods came out of those passages and started blocking any passerby from reaching the roadway.

Speaking of the Thousand-mile Carriage, it was a particular vehicle used when very important matters related to the country were involved. As a result, that amount of preparation used—where everyone stayed on high alert—was perfectly reasonable.

"Oh my, this is quite an exaggerated reception..."

When the gates opened completely, the girl who was still leaning on the coach's window was able to see the entire pathway. At that moment, when she caught sight of the countless soldiers lined up at regular intervals on the road, Mira realized just how grand was the greeting prepared for her and couldn't help but mutter a line in dismal.

The carriage then slowly started moving again, gradually increasing the pace until it reached its maximum speed after several seconds, the view of the city around the vehicle quickly changing and moving behind it. While following the wild dash of the Thousand-mile Carriage with curious eyes, the inhabitants

of Lunatic Lake would easily take notice of Garrett, who was working as the coachman; consequently, it piqued everyone's interest as they started wondering about how serious and important the matters related to that visit were.

Steadily, Mira began growing accustomed with the scenery outside and, soon after, she discovered a very preeminent building among the many others that had entered her field of vision.

(Now that I am closer, I can see just how big it really is...)

It was one of the Tools of the Five Elements, the Craftsmen Workshop Bureau. Upon seeing the impressive structure—that greatly resembled the good old German architecture—placed right inside the capital, Mira decided to schedule for later a sightseeing tour to each of those five great constructions.

After a few more moments of shaking inside the carriage, the young girl noticed that the moving scenery outside was gently slowing down, coming to a complete halt as they finally arrived in front of the gates to the Royal Castle.

"I guess we finally arrived."

Mira, whose body had stiffened from sitting inside the coach for almost the entire trip, loosened up after stretching for a bit; her next action was to secretly leave another empty bottle of *Apple au Lait* by her feet, on the vehicle's floor.

"Yes, I'm thankful for your efforts, Mira-sama."

Garrett opened the door of the carriage and bowed, subsequently extending a hand in order to escort the young girl outside.

"Sorry for all the trouble."

As Mira thanked and apologized to the military man, she followed it by refusing his help; the girl gently brushed Garrett's hand off and simply jumped out of the vehicle. A few moments later, she raised her face to gaze at the castle and realized that even after three decades, at least that place didn't change in the least; so it was with a mix of disappointment and relief on her face that Mira brought down her sight, only to become speechless immediately after.

When the gates to the Royal Castle slowly opened, she was able to see what awaited behind them: a reception even grander that the one in the roadway she had just crossed. On each side of the passage that led to the interior of the building was a line of knights, standing completely still while holding a sword before their own eyes. And forming another line behind them were more knights, each one with a spear in their hands. In addition to all of that, at regular intervals in those lines it was possible to see soldiers hoisting the flag of the kingdom.

"Now, well… this seems a bit too much..."

"It just shows how much Solomon-sama is pleased with your visit, Mira-sama."

"It was that guy, huh..."

Mira let out a sigh as she muttered those few words, a weird sense of discomfort now quickly assaulting her.

"If we're talking about Dunbalf-sama, he is a hero of the kingdom, right? So this kind of reception for the disciple of said hero is perfectly normal."

"Hmmm, is that so?"

"Yes, of course. Well then, Mira-sama, let's go."

The moment they moved away from the vehicle, a caretaker working for the castle appeared and began transporting the Thousand-mile Carriage to the stables.

With Garrett escorting Mira towards the building, they both crossed the gates that had been opened for them. And not a second later, their ears were suddenly attacked by a strong and rhythmical sound made by drums.

And it didn't end there. The knights that were holding swords thrusted their weapons diagonally above their heads and readied their shields, each one of their defensive equipment engraved with the national coat of arms. At the same time, behind them, the second row of knights tilted their lances with the same oblique angle of the swords. Effectively, the combined actions of those particular soldiers created an arch that covered the passageway to the Royal Caste.

"Hm, well… this seems a *bit too much*..."

"For me, this feels somewhat pleasing."

In the middle of that grand reception for Mira, the one who seemed to enjoy it the most was the person supposed to be guiding her, Garrett; he simply revealed a great smile while speaking to the young girl.

"Good grief, what am I going to do with you now..."

Such carefree attitude displayed by that man caused Mira to mirror his expression with another broad smile. Furthermore, it made a really favorable impression of his human nature while also increasing the girl's praises for Solomon, who had a person like Garrett as his subordinate.

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Supported by the delightful sound of the fife and drum corps, the visitors crossed the exaggerated arc created by the knights and finally entered the castle. Waiting for them at the entrance were two palace guards who bowed and said, "*We will be guiding you to where the King is waiting.*" Because Mira didn't like standing out that much, she felt relieved that it was a bit quieter there and followed them.

When the guards opened the door to the king's place, the pleasant fragrance of sophisticated flowers entered the visitor's noses. A carpet had been laid on the floor and, from where Mira stood, she could see that it was colored in a specific order, at equal intervals: first was the black, then blue, followed by green, red and finally white. After a quick look at the room, she

noticed five individuals there, with the most conspicuous one being, obviously, the young boy seated on the throne that was placed atop a set of stairs.

He had a light green hair that slightly covered his golden eyes and wore on his head a crown adorned with countless of jewels. At first glance, that scene felt really out of place; however, the boy clad in sumptuous clothing and seated

on the throne was, astonishingly, an impeccable king. That fact could be easily assumed by looking at all his accomplishments done while he governed the country for over thirty years.

Indeed, that young boy—who kept staring at Mira with a mischievous look on his face—was Dunbalf's friend and the leader of Arkite Kingdom, King Solomon. Except for his clothing, that looked somewhat more luxurious than before, the King's appearance was still the same even after all the years the girl had been absent.

A few steps below from the top of the stairs, there were two individuals with their backs turned to King Solomon: the first was a knight standing in wait, exuding an atmosphere that indicated he was no ordinary person; the other was an Expert wearing a robe tinged in black and covering his head with a hood. Said Expert observed Mira with a gentle expression while smiling at her. On the other hand, the knight breathed a sigh in disappointment when he realized that the disciple of Dunbalf, the kingdom's hero, was a mere little girl.

Garrett took a step forward, kneeled and...

"I humbly present you Elder Dunbalf-sama's pupil, Mira-sama."

Made his report, bowing afterwards.

"Thank you very much for your efforts on the trip. You can move back now."

The one who replied, while exhibiting an imposing air as he stood next to the throne, was Suleiman. As a member of the Elf race, his characteristic blond hair fluttered over his graceful face.

Upon hearing the orders given, Garrett said, "*Then, if you will excuse me*," and walked to the side.

"Nice to meet you, Mira-san. My name is Suleiman, personal aide of King Solomon."

"Yeah, Mira here."

While only moving her eyes to recognize the person talking to her, the girl answered with a very brief greeting. Garrett, who was near her, became greatly flustered by seeing Mira's unchanged attitude even after she stood before the King. But the person herself had no way to know what was going through that man's head, so she crossed her arms and placed a hand on her chin while trying to inspect Solomon.

In spite of the girl's efforts, however, no information appeared on her field of vision as she observed the King. Instead, she was able to confirm Suleiman's full name and status floating within her line of sight.

(Just… what is the meaning of this…?)

"Let us get to the point, first we need you to prove that you are, indeed, Dunbalf-sama's apprentice. Are you fine with that?"

When Mira was in deep thought, trying to figure out why she could inspect Suleiman but not Solomon, the former's words brought her back.

"Oh right, no problem."

She brought out the Master Key from her Item Box and, with it in hand, walked towards the King's aide while saying, "*Here it is.*" Or, more precisely, the girl *tried* walking towards him. Because all of a sudden, she was stopped by the knight who drew his sword, unable to contain himself anymore as he said with an angry voice,

"Don't get any closer than that! You wench, there's a limit to how disrespectful one can be!"

While also pointing his weapon towards Mira.

That man was the leader of the Imperial Knights of the Kingdom of Arkite, Reynard. Right before the audience, Solomon had told him to not mind the visitor even if she didn't know the proper etiquette. And followed those orders he did, keeping in check his boiling emotions as Mira didn't kneel before the King and kept using such improper way of speech.

However, of all things she dared to approach King Solomon without being allowed to do so, causing him to finally snap. Mira didn't know that, but there was a restriction to how close a person could get to the monarch. The distance was determined according to one's own social standing, and guests, excluding exceptional cases, should never move past the black section of the carpet.

"What? Then how will I hand it over to Suleiman?"

"Just give it to the palace guard standing by your side!"

In the old days, Solomon and Dunbalf had always walked together as equals; consequently, to Mira, that visit was nothing more than a meet-up with her friend. She just wanted to talk with him for a bit, that was the only thing the girl had in her mind. Because of that, she completely forgot about how serious an audience with the highest-ranking person in a country was supposed to be.

(How bothersome...)

Mira was talking as if she were still playing the game, but upon seeing the anger-filled expression on the knight's face, she finally remembered that the circumstances right now were different. She didn't know a thing about the proper manners required by visitors on such an occasion, so it was with a bit of unease that Mira pinched the tip of Reynard's sword with her fingers and presented the Master Key to him.

"That is right. Sorry, my bad. Anyway, since I am here already, could you hand it to him?"

"You bastard… just how far are you going to… first of all, get out of the stairs!"

Seething with rage, the knight put his strength on his sword. Contrary to his expectations, though, the weapon that was supposed to be held by the fingers of a mere little girl didn't move an inch; Reynard couldn't help but reveal a surprised expression at such absurd occurrence.

"Reynard, bring it here."

The boy sitting on the throne finally talked, albeit using a few words only.

"But Solomon-sama! *That person* is being too disrespectful!"

"Remember what I said before? This is still within my expectations. Or perhaps do you mean to make me wait even longer?"

The knight seemed to shrink under the King's gaze, causing Mira to wonder if she somehow made a mistake without noticing it. Nevertheless, a moment later the girl changed her mind and just disregarded that as an annoyed Reynard grabbed the card from her hand. In response, she released his blade. The man then threw a sharp glare at Mira while observing the pale and thin arm coming out of her robe, concluding, in the end, that she most likely used some kind of shady ability to hold his sword. As a result, the knight further increased his vigilance against Mira.

Amidst all that, Garrett was observing the scene unfolding before him and, when he noticed that it had calmed down—from the bottom of his heart—he felt relieved, now that everything had been settled without turning into some kind of fight.

While Mira walked down the stairs and returned to her original place, Solomon examined the item he had received from Reynard, trying to ascertain if it was, indeed, the Master Key to the Tower of Summoning.

"Without a doubt, this is Dunbalf's key. If we consider that he, as the master, handed it over to his pupil, then it is perfectly understandable."

As Solomon said that, he gave the Master Key to the royal guard by his side and, a moment later, the girl received her item back. She then quickly returned it to her box while simultaneously trying to move away from the knight's line of sight, whose piercing glare was still directed at her.

"Now that we have confirmed it, let's head to another place. Disciple of Dunbalf, I want you to tell me everything about your master, whose whereabouts have been unknown for thirty years. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, no problem."

Mira gave an immediate reply to the King's life-saving invitation.

"Well then, I believe that my office should be fine since our conversation will be more private there. To everyone else, you can join the party prepared by the parade group."

Upon hearing Solomon's words, Reynard once again took a step forward, forcing a bitter smile to appear on the young girl's face.

"Solomon-sama, even if she is Dunbalf-sama's apprentice, staying alone with such a suspicious person is too dangerous. Your humble servant asks to, at least, stay together with Your Majesty in the room!"

The knight threw a glance at Mira and bowed deeply to his king, giving a proposal concerning Solomon's safety.

(At this rate we will never leave this place...)

Considering that situation, the girl thought that she could, indeed, appear

as someone suspicious to him. On the other hand, Reynard's loyalty was so exaggerated that Mira simply shook her head, feeling tired of the back and forth happening there.

"Reynard, are you trying to imply that I could lose to the likes of that little girl?"

Solomon displayed an extraordinary spirit as he fired a question at his knight. Even if the King had the appearance of a young boy, it didn't mean that the three decades he kept working as the country's sovereign were just for show. It wasn't just politics that decided the fate of a nation in the world they lived in, but above everything else was the military prowess of its leader. And it was in that exact world that Solomon had continued to rule over the whole country for all those years; consequently, one could easily guess just how strong the King was.

"N-No, absolutely not! It's just… if that person uses some kind of weird ability, we must be prepared."

Only that Mira had absolutely no idea about any "kind of weird ability" he was talking about. It was understandable, though, considering Reynard had mistaken what Mira did with his sword as the girl using a spell or ability. He arbitrarily concluded that there was no way that his well-built physique would lose in terms of strength against such a frail-looking girl. And in reality, Mira's strength had been indeed boosted by her own equipment, but since she didn't understand that Reynard was talking about said status boost instead of a "weird ability", the girl had no way of explaining herself.

"Mira… that's your name, right? Do you have any intention of causing harm to me? "

"Why would I? I simply came here to talk with you."

When Mira's reply reached his ears, Solomon's face briefly displayed a pleasant smile.

"Did you hear that? I also want to speak about a lot of stuff with her. At least be reasonable, Reynard."

"But, if by any chance something happened to Your Majesty, I would never…"

The knight pleaded so while clenching his fists. However, the one who finally stopped that back and forth barrage of arguments was the Expert, who had stayed silent until now.

"Then, how about this; I will be on standby together with you, Reynard-san, on the corridor right before Solomon-sama's office. If anything happens, we'll be able to answer it right away. Do you believe that Mira-sama, or even Dunbalf-sama would be able to do anything to His Majesty in the short period of time we would take to enter the room?"

"Hhmm, ugh… indeed..."

"Alright, so it is settled. The fact is, I was really looking forward to the party, but since Reynard-san wouldn't budge, it can't be helped. I believe that

it should be enough if it's just the two of us doing the job, right?"

After the Expert made his suggestion, he placed a hand on Reynard's shoulder while smiling.

"That's a great idea. Sorry that you won't be able to attend, Joachim. We'll hold another party again soon, okay?"

After nodding with all his might, the King paused for a moment and got up from his throne.

"Oh no, there is no need, Your Majesty. Reynard-san will treat me to something."

"Hmgghh..."

Not able to retort anymore, the knight revealed a twisted expression.

"Okay then, shall we go?"

On Solomon's invitation, three people followed him, making way to the corridor that led to his office.

Chapter 11

Situated on the fifth floor of the Royal Castle, the King's Office had the privilege of overlooking the city's lake. And it was inside of such a special place that Mira and Solomon stood, completely alone. Awaiting further orders, the king's loyal servants, Reynard, the Knight, and Joachim, the Expert, stood on the corridor that led to the room.

The interior of Solomon's study was surrounded by bookshelves, with every single one of them packed full of books containing knowledge about the techniques and histories of places from all sides of the world. Under the view of said bookshelves, the King was currently sitting on a leather-covered chair, his back closely pressed against the furniture. On the other hand, Mira was nonchalantly observing the room as she sat down on the corner of a sofa, its entire surface looking dangerously close to getting buried by official documents.

"Well, this place seems like a complete mess, you know?"

"Come on, I'm so loaded with work there's no way I could find a breather to clean the room."

Even if he was addressing a young girl, the tone Solomon used to speak with her was incredibly informal, unthinkable for someone who stood as the king of a country. That, however, wasn't a problem since Mira had already forgotten the difference between the positions they currently held in the kingdom.

"Humm, indeed."

After that reply, both of them straightened their postures and exchanged looks.

"First of all, could I go directly to the point and ask you something?"

Solomon focused intently on Mira while raising his index finger.

"Alright, what is it?"

With the intent of increasing her level of comfort while sitting, the girl took the many documents that were in her way, on the sofa, and placed them indiscriminately by her own feet. During that time, she just directed an affirmative answer to the King, without paying much attention to the person himself.

"Are you… Dunbalf?"

Those words were enough to bring her back, and Mira caught herself turning to look at Solomon with surprised eyes, the official papers she had been holding moments ago now scattered all over the floor. The reason she was taken aback was simply because the young girl was in the middle of thought, trying to find a harmless way to explain, if possible, her current situation. She wanted to keep to a minimum the damage to her own image, or rather, to her very existence as a human being.

However, not even in her wildest dreams did Mira expect it would be the King himself who would start with that delicate subject. Furthermore, his question wasn't something he used to try and collect basic information about her, but actually a means to confirm his suspicion; the smile on Solomon's face already revealed how much he was sure about that fact and had no traces of his usual love for playing pranks on others. Finally, after looking at that very expression he displayed, Mira was able to confirm that, without a doubt, the boy in front of her was none other than her close friend Solomon, the person with whom she'd worked hard together during the game period.

At least, somehow, things would be quick then, and she won't even need to fabricate any more lies. While disregarding her own image for now, the girl decided that the first thing she needed was to get a good grasp of the current situation. Without paying any mind to the documents she'd dropped, Mira once again sat down on the sofa with all her weight.

"Indeed, well done."

To Mira's short and affirmative answer, Solomon's lips parted into a huge grin.

"Man, talk about a complete change!"

While holding a hand over his mouth and giggling like a maniac, the King glanced at Mira over and over; every time he caught a glimpse of her figure, he would lose it and burst out in laughter.

"Yeah yeah yeah, a lot of stuff happened to cause this, you know?"

The girl glared at the laughing Solomon, a disgruntled and sour look in her eyes.

"But that kind of change… it's like heaven and earth. Well, somehow, that's so like you. That loli body, I mean."

"Oh, leave me alone."

He held his laughter back while eyeing Mira's whole body again and gave his seal of approval. However, that only made her turn away and pout, seemingly annoyed. The entire scene was so ridiculous that, at first glance, no one would be able to guess it was made by one of the highest ranking Experts of the kingdom together with that country's very monarch.

"Anyway, could you answer me something first? Just what is this world?"

Mira started with the most direct, simplest question she had.

Solomon briefly finished laughing and, while fixing his posture, sorted out the information he had in his head to finally reply with a few words.

"I don't know."

"How is that possible? Even after thirty years you do not know anything?"

Her eyes slightly widened when she heard what the King had said.

"Oh yeah, that's right. Properly speaking, we're not in a game. The world here is **real**, but… is this planet somewhere in the same universe as our Earth, the place we were born? Or are we now living in a world from some kind of

universe that follows a completely different set of laws? What if it isn't any of that and we're actually in a dimension composed of principles that are outside our very comprehension? I still can't answer these questions so that's what I actually meant when I said 'I don't know.' "

"I see now… but anyway, we really are in a real world, huh?"

"Most likely. Just what kind of crazy daydream would make it possible for one to clearly feel the passage of thirty years?"

Solomon shrugged while directing his gaze at a part of the bookshelves, replete of data collected from events that had happened during those three decades since the game became reality; "*I really did my best,*" he said in a self-praise upon seeing the sheer amount of information stored there.

"Well then, in my case it would still be enough for me to think of it as a dream..."

"Okay, that's fine since you've only spent one day here. But, too bad! This is real."

Spent one day. In a sense, these words reminded Mira of a really important question that kept bothering her mind.

"By the way, Solomon. How did you know that I was Dunbalf?"

She didn't remember giving any hints that would lead to such a conclusion. At most, it would be the Master Key, but the excuse that it was an item given to her by her master wasn't something so poor it would fall apart so easily. In fact, both Litalia and Mariana were convinced after seeing that key. Anyway, who would really expect that someone who went missing for thirty years would suddenly reappear there? That boy, however, got the answer right in an instant. There must've been a reason for that and Mira wanted to hear it.

"Hmmm, yeah. If I were to go into details it would take too much time, so I'll be brief. I received a report from my Magic Clothed Knights stating that they'd met a young girl named Mira. It also detailed that said girl was a Summoning Expert who controlled an incredibly strong Dark Knight. And right after the report, I heard that some girl, also called Mira, appeared in one of the Silver Linked Towers and claimed to be Dunbalf's apprentice."

"So with that alone you managed to guess it?"

"Oh no, I received the report yesterday night immediately after checking the Friend List. For thirty years your status had appeared as *offline* but, on that day, it changed to *online*."

"Wait, did you just say 'Friend List'?"

Of course, that list wasn't something unknown to Mira; simply put, it allowed one to register friends and verify if they were online or not. What she really wanted to know was where did Solomon find such thing in the menu. If there were an entry for it she might have tried to open the list, but that was exactly the reason Mira didn't consider doing that. When the girl was still in a game, the Friend List could be accessed by opening the System entry in the menu, but that option was now gone from the screen. Then, how did her friend

manage to check that Friend List and confirm that she was online?

"The System option in the Menu is gone, so how is it even possible that you managed to open the list?"

"Man, that's right. Considering you've just arrived in this world, you must only know the **game** methods to do that stuff, right?"

When he finished talking, Solomon placed his fingers in the usual position to open the Menu, over the bracelet on his left arm, and kept them there. After a short while, a screen that only the boy could see was projected to him, its appearance differing from the regular Menu.

"Now, try copying what I did a moment ago."

Mira did exactly what she had seen him doing and continued to press her fingertips against the Menu. A second later, a completely new screen appeared and, there, she was able to confirm the entries in the list.

"Ohoho… look at this..."

From top to bottom, the items listed in the menu were: 『Friend List』, 『Map』 and 『Divine Protection』.

"There is one entry here I have never seen before..."

The girl murmured in surprise and tried selecting the "Map" entry that floated mid-air. Although the entire screen suddenly blanked out, there were no further changes to it.

"Hey, Solomon. What is up with this 'Map' in the menu? I believe it did not exist before..."

Since she didn't understand what it did even after testing the item, Mira was quick to ask her friend. Then, while closing his terminal, Solomon turned his eyes to look at the girl.

"It's a newly added entry. If you leave a map in the special items section of your Item Box, it can be easily accessed through that 'Map' entry. Pretty useful, no?"

"Ohh, so that is how you use it. Yeah, it is handy, indeed."

The moment Mira heard the King's explanation, she instantly understood just how convenient was that item in the menu. Basically, it could be said that while playing in a game that boasted a naturally large world, the "Map" function was essential; however, Ark Earth Online did not have such a feature. Instead, there were rough diagrams of the continent sold at the Beginners' Three Kingdoms, but even then their selling price was at a level that newbies, the ones who needed maps the most, couldn't afford.

Although later the players managed to create more detailed versions of that kind of item, they still needed to take out and unfold a different map for each region if they wanted to check a certain location. Of course, those maps had no markings on them, let alone a dot that would show the player's current position.

"Right? If you have a map with you, why don't you put it in your special

items section now?”

On his suggestion, Mira immediately opened her Item Box but then, she found no map there.

“Ahh, now I remember. I left all my maps in the flying island.”

“Oohh my. Now that’s a disaster you have there.”

The flying island she had mentioned was the ¥2000 item from the cash shop, the Floating Continent. When her Item Box had gotten incredibly cluttered, she ended up placing all the maps inside the wooden house of her portable mass of land. In most cases, when Mira wanted to go somewhere (a dungeon, labyrinth or a field, for example) she would use the Floating Continent and check the corresponding map to reach the place. But right now, that convenient way of traveling backfired on her.

Then, at that moment, she was reminded of something.

“Now that I think about it, I cannot find the Cash Shop Management menu...”

As the girl expressed her concerns, even though Solomon displayed a meaningful smile on his face, a distinct and serious tone appeared in his voice when he proceeded to answer.

“Apparently, that entry is simply gone, together with the ‘Message Box’ and the ‘Shutdown’ to log out.”

The Cash Shop Management was, just like its name said, a menu that handled everything related to cash shop items; obviously, it was right there that one could select and use the Floating Continent. Since that entry had disappeared, it meant that her ability to access her flying island was also gone.

“No… way...”

“Yeah, at first I was really upset. All kinds of holy swords were left on my flying island… ahh, even now I can still remember them clear as day...”

Afterwards, while under the comfortable light generated by a lamp in the office, somehow both the people there spent a few moments simply staring at the space in front of them, reminiscing about the many items they’d lost. Inside the room, the shadows cast on the walls wavered faintly and hopelessly, as if reflecting the two friends’ state of mind.

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“Anyway, after finding out about me, you went and sent that urgent invitation for the audience, right?”

Despite the fact that the wound inflicted on her by the earlier shock was still big, Mira managed to recover herself.

“Exactly. The timing was simply too perfect, you know? And even if your appearance had changed, I could guess that it was because of the Vanity Case. Something like that wouldn’t be impossible to happen.”

Following Mira, Solomon also sealed once again the scars from his past and turned to face the reality in front of his eyes.

"If I knew this would have happened, I would have never used it in the first place..."

"You were so obsessed with that appearance of yours to the point you created a damn collection of screenshots of your avatar doing cool poses. That's why I thought you absolutely liked that old man's image... but why did you end up changing it?"

"Hmm, well… it is a long history..."

She then continued and talked about how she had received a message informing that her game money balance would be expiring soon, resulting in her buying the only ¥500 item in the shop. Next, while omitting the fact that she'd pulled an all-nighter after deciding to create the ideal female image, Mira explained she had just wanted to check, out of curiosity, the parts that could be selected by the Vanity Case.

"And then you turned out like that, huh."

While displaying a bit of compassion on his face, Solomon expressed how it was, indeed, a misfortune that had befallen the girl.

"Yep. I do not remember ever hitting the 'confirm' button, only that I fell asleep while looking at the screen."

"Reaally…? It's pretty strange for you to suddenly doze off like that. You probably lost yourself working on the character editing."

"When I noticed, I had spent the whole night on it."

It was too late, but Mira realized her mouth had just splendidly betrayed her. Furthermore, that longtime friend of hers had already started to suspect that something was missing from her history. To prove his assumptions, Solomon moved his lips and spoke.

"That 'Mira-chan' of yours was really done with all your might... "

"...It is my greatest masterpiece..."

"Yup, yup! Say it again! That loli body is soo like you!"

The King looked like a kid whose prank was successful, but that appearance was easily overshadowed as the corners of his mouth distorted in a broad and wicked smile. In the past, the two of them used to talk all night about the characters and idols they liked; as a result, they easily understood each other's preferences. And because of that, Solomon was able to see through Mira's excessively honest figure.

However, differently from all the examples she had given before, that revealed hints of her preferences, the girl's current body was, from head to toe, a blatant image of her very tastes. Then, upon realizing that she was now a walking embodiment of her inclinations, Mira threw herself to the back of the sofa, feeling completely drained.

"Solomon… do you have a Vanity Case?"

Sounding almost like it was a plea, Mira directed a question at her friend.

"Yeah, I have one. Here, look."

Meeting his friend's expectations, Solomon produced a japanese-style black case from his Item Box. Undoubtedly, it was the『Vanity Case』, its lustrous lacquer coating easily recognizable from the distance.

For a second, Mira stared at that box in sheer amazement. But suddenly, she stood up and assaulted the King.

"GIVE ME THAT!!"

"W-Whooa!"

When Solomon was hit by the jumping girl's body, he ended up falling together with his chair. Moreover, some accessories on the desk were caught by the ribbons from her clothing and also fell on the floor making a loud noise.

"Solomon-sama! What happened!?"

Promptly reacting to that huge commotion, Reynard opened the door to the office without any reservation and became speechless by the spectacle in front of his eyes; it was a scene that easily surpassed anything he would have ever expected to happen.

There were two people entangled together. Mira had fallen over Solomon and was now in a straddling position over him, all the while grasping the hand he held the Vanity Case with both of her own. At first glance, it would appear that she had assaulted the boy, but the biggest problem was Solomon's current posture. The hand he had used to push Mira back was magnificently holding a very soft swelling on her chest. In addition, his leg was in such a position that it ended up lifting the hem of the girl's skirt-like robe, exposing her lower body.

"Oh, don't worry, there's no problem here."

Solomon informed the knight while feigning serenity, but no matter how one would look at it, there was indeed a problem, and a huge one at it.

"I see it now, you wench! You have finally showed your true colors!"

As usual, Reynard started displaying his reckless behavior. And arriving a little late, but with the important job of cooling down the knight's anger, was Joachim, whose face appeared at the door to take a peek inside the office.

"My, Reynard-san. Let's calm down and observe the situation here. Look, isn't it fine? At a glance, it will only seem that Mira-sama has pushed His Majesty down, but I ask you to give a careful look at Solomon-sama's hand. Can you see how firmly our King is rubbing it?"

Following Joachim's suggestion, Reynard confirmed it with his own eyes and twitched his eyebrows in anguish.

"Hmm, indeed… but even then… ngh!"

With one hand, the Expert stopped his companion, who was about to object once more, and presented his reasoning.

"In short, this is what happened: when they were having a good time on

the chair getting to *know each other thoroughly*, they suddenly lost balance and ended up in this position. And… oh yes, that's right! I simply believed that Solomon-sama had no interest in women, but it was actually a case of finding someone with a suitable figure that met His Majesty's tastes. I finally understood it! Now the future of the Arkite Kingdom is secured."

Apparently enjoying that spectacle, as evidenced by his smile, Joachim reproached Reynard.

"There's a problem, though, Joachim. Will the others accept the likes of that little girl?"

"She is the disciple of Dunbalf-sama. Isn't this one of the greatest titles someone could have?"

"Hhhnngh… certainly..."

Having their circumstances arbitrarily decided by others, Mira and Solomon finally realized the entire situation they were currently in. The girl was straddling over the boy with their faces close to each other; simultaneously, the boy was feeling an extremely pleasant and soft sensation through his hand. Then, coupled with Reynard and Joachim's behavior, they deduced the answer to that entire scene. Finally, at the same time, both friends looked at each other in the eyes and, as if kicking one away from the other, instantly separated themselves, keeping a considerable distance between their bodies.

"Hey, wait a moment! You people are making a huge misunderstanding there!!"

"Yeah, she's right. When Mira was falling I ended up getting dragged by her and fell down too, there's nothing else besides that."

In a big hurry, they attempted an explanation by correcting what the others had said. However, compared to the spectacle witnessed just now by the King's assistants, their words had zero persuasive power.

"Ah, Solomon-sama. Just in case, I will leave it to Your Majesty on how to conduct yourself when we leave."

"For the sake of the Kingdom… for an heir..."

While Joachim finished with some unnecessary lines and Reynard dreamed of the future, they both calmly left the office and gently closed the door.

"I'll hold an emergency meeting later..."

"I feel bad for you."

"Don't go thinking it doesn't concern you."

"If I return to my old appearance using that Vanity Case it will be fine, right?"

Instead of working out a way to clear the misunderstanding, it would be faster to just restore Dunbalf's figure. That was what Mira suggested while pointing at the item in Solomon's hand.

"Ahh… that's impossible. Did you forget that this was a cash shop item?"

“Of course I did not. I am aware that since we cannot access the cash shop anymore, this item is indeed really valuable. If you let me use it, I promise to work with all my might for you and repay your generosity. So, give that item to me.”

Just like a kitten leaping at its prey, the girl reached for the King’s hand.

“I’m talking about the rules for this kind of item. You can’t give or trade them with others.”

As he reminded Mira about that rule, Solomon extended his arm and held out the Vanity Case to her.

“Oh come on, look. I can just pick it up like… wait a moment, what is the meaning of this!?”

When Mira, whose fingers were the only part of her hands not covered by her sleeves, tried to take the item from the boy’s hand, something unexpected happened. As if laughing at her efforts, her fingertips hopelessly went through the Vanity Case like it were a simple hologram, leaving no sensation of touch.

Chapter 12

"Just what is the meaning of this!?"

While looking completely baffled, Mira stared at her own hands that were now literally passing through the black case.

"As you can see, the game world may have turned into a real one, but we're still bound by its original rules. Considering the Vanity Case is a non-transferable item, you can't hand it to anyone else. In addition, items for which you have authority over, like your Master Key, can be given to others; however, no one is able to steal or take them by force."

"Basically, unless I get one of those cases by myself, I am pretty much stuck with this appearance, right?"

The young girl drew her face closer to the phantom-like item and squinted.

"Exactly. Anyway, you already know the harsh truth, but I must remind you that you can't access the cash shop anymore."

"Oh hell..."

Upon this simple exchange of words, Mira dropped her entire body on the sofa and stayed there, lying face down. Her mind, that was now assaulted with the desire to simply give up, began searching desperately for something, **anything** to get her out of that situation.

"Are there any exceptions to the rules?"

Clinging to a tiny sliver of hope, the little girl still had the strength to turn her head towards Solomon.

"Never heard of anything like that in the thirty years I've been here."

"No way..."

It was an answer backed by three decades' worth of experiences, enough to quickly shatter any hopes she had left. Trying to escape into the land of dreams, Mira closed her eyelids as she returned her face to the couch and started reminiscing of the magnificent figure she once had.

"You know, I really want to help you on that matter, in any way possible... but there isn't anything I can do."

"Yeah, right. I bet that deep down you must be just laughing at my troubles."

Mira was now the perfect image of a kid throwing a tantrum, the incessant and negative thoughts in her mind permeating her words while she grumbled on the couch.

"Oh no, of course not. Considering you've only spent a day in this world, you didn't forget about the state of our country, right? You are one of the Elders who made this kingdom able to stand on par with the other countries, I would never laugh at… what happened to you."

When Solomon threw a glance at the girl lying on the couch, he endured the urge to burst out in laughter and forced a poker face. However, Mira didn't miss the slight trembling of his lips.

"It is just as I thought! You are really making fun of me."

"Oops, my bad. But the fact that I want to help you still holds true."

Upon correcting himself, the King stared at Mira while showing his usual and gentle smile. In return, however, he only received a displeased stare from the girl.

"Ahhh, by the way, did you hear anything about the other Sages? Such important people are still missing..."

Solomon averted his gaze as he tried to change the subject. The matter was the greatest incident that happened in the Arkite Kingdom, where Dunbalf had disappeared and, less than a year later, all other Elders suffered the same fate.

"Yes, Graia told me. From what I understood, everyone was gone at around the same time, but Luminaria returned after about ten years. I went to the towers to talk with Luminaria and hear about everything that had happened while I was gone."

"Hmm, I see now. Well, if you know that stuff already then things will be easier to explain. Let's start with a question. What do you think would happen to our country if its greatest military assets, the Elders, were gone?"

Akin to the host of a quiz show, the boy presented his inquiry. At the same time, his smiling expression slightly darkened.

"That is… right..."

She could easily guess the answer. Mira softly narrowed her eyes as she began stroking her chin with her fingertips, groaning in thought while still lying on the couch.

Making use of the Nine Elders' influence and power, the Kingdom of Arkite had managed to avoid conflicts against other countries by never waging wars against them. Since it had plentiful lands and the kingdom's ruler was devoid of greed, there was no need to take away someone else's territories; then, the efforts made by the country were directed into its own defenses. Naturally and gradually, those countries looked to start commercial relations with Arkite.

However, the individuals who held together the kingdom's defenses had been lost. Ten years later, when the incident was officially announced, Luminaria had already returned; but no matter how strong an Elder was, being responsible for the entire country was too much for a single individual. As a result, the number of military interventions against the kingdom multiplied, reflecting the other countries' desire to obtain its profitable lands. The situation didn't evolve into a complete war, but the constant skirmishes gradually brought Arkite to exhaustion. Such was the current situation of the kingdom.

A single one may not exert much influence, but if all nine Sages returned together, their persuasive power would be immeasurable. And considering

group battles, there was a sage who was especially known for its prowess in them, the War Power Dunbalf.

"Look, this is my own opinion as the king, but first of all you are this country's hero. Your existence alone bears a tremendous influence, so we can't really shout from the rooftops that you, the hero, became a little girl."

"Ugh… gghhh..."

The reason why she had professed herself a pupil of the sage Dunbalf was similar; it was an act to protect her own reputation. That is why Mira chose to not say a word about Solomon's statement.

"Since you're still the same person, your real strength is also the same, but everyone's impression of you would be completely different. Although I think that it wouldn't be such a problem if you had that appearance since the start, the image that everyone has of you is that of a veteran Expert, someone whose figure would never put to shame the 'Sage' title."

Having her ideal male figure praised was enough to put Mira in a good mood, resulting in the girl turning a joyful look at the King while making a victorious pose, as if telling him how right she had been.

"It is exactly like you said. Even now, I can still say with complete confidence that it was my greatest masterpiece."

"Then, can you imagine what people would think if they knew that such a great hero became a loli? What kind of image would be evoked in their minds?"

When questioned, Mira tried to think about it. *Someone respected by others*. Taking for example the magicians who were the source for Dunbalf's name, what would she think of them if they, suddenly, became very young girls?

"...Someone you could not rely on."

While murmuring that, the girl finally realized her current situation in its fullness.

"Indeed. What I really wanted was to announce that Dunbalf has returned, but there's no way we can reveal that this is your current appearance. Vanity Cases are something unknown to the citizens, so they wouldn't understand."

"Humm, can you afford to just proclaim that 'Dunbalf' is back without showing him?"

With an expression that said she came up with some great idea, Mira suddenly straightened her posture on the couch.

"That would be hard, I think. Remember that this is the return of the great hero after thirty years. The entire country would hold a grand party to celebrate and we can't do that without the guest of honor. In addition, even if we didn't have that problem and things calmed down in the kingdom, the other countries would surely try to investigate."

Her bright idea had been utterly destroyed. At the same time, the girl seemed to be destroyed too as she slumped face-first on the sofa and, once

again, laid there.

It was exactly as Solomon had said. After three decades of absence, holding a huge party for the returning hero would be the natural course of events. Spies would also be sent to find out if Dunbalf was really there or not; distrust between Arkite and the other nations would then be instigated the moment they discovered the truth.

Nevertheless, since the time he met with Mira, the King had no intention of revealing Dunbalf's reappearance; there was something more important than that. In order to tell his friend what was on his mind, Solomon walked towards the place where she currently was: the sofa. When Mira saw that boy standing nearby, she also noticed that instead of his usual smile, his face now had a completely serious look. Under that gaze, she corrected herself to sit straight and looked up at him, puzzled.

Then, something happened at that moment. The hallway—just outside the room—suddenly became noisy and it was possible to hear Reynard's and Joachim's voices coming from there. Wondering what could possibly be happening, Solomon approached the door and opened it, revealing that someone was already there: the ead messenger of National Defense affairs.

"What is it?"

In a completely different manner than when he was conversing with Mira, the King directed his question with a deep and calm tone to the officer in front of him. Reynard and Joachim, that stood on both sides of the door, bowed and stepped back. Then, after being surprised for a moment at the sudden appearance of King Solomon, the messenger followed suit and immediately made the same gesture as his colleagues. Subsequently, he took his report and began reading its contents out loud.

"This is an urgent report from the Benedict Fort. A herd of monsters has been spotted advancing towards the northwest. Their numbers are estimated to be around 200, composed of over thirty different species."

After finishing his task, the head messenger stepped back and waited for further orders; still, he seemed to have been in a big hurry to reach there, as evidenced by how much his shoulders kept shaking. Near him, the Knight and the Expert displayed their clear agitation over the contents of such a simple report, indicating that it was, indeed, a matter of urgency.

"If we are talking about the Benedict Fort, it's already inside our own territory! Are you telling me the border security let that huge number of monsters pass by them!?"

"It has been barely a day and there is already another pack invading… that is somehow too soon. And over thirty species mixed in it, this is the first time I have heard of such a thing happening. I am a bit worried."

In contrast to the anxious Reynard, Joachim calmly analyzed the situation, albeit with a stern expression on his face.

"Barely a day, species mixed in… hmm, wait a moment."

When Solomon's brain processed and reviewed the report, he murmured a

few words, seemingly struck with an idea. The messenger understood those orders and stood in attention after correcting his posture, waiting for the King's instructions. Then, Solomon returned to the office after closing the door behind him.

One way or another, the boy came up with something to fix that situation. At least that much could be understood by Joachim, as he didn't miss the faint smile his king made at that moment.

"I want to ask you something."

Immediately, that was the first thing Solomon said after facing Mira, who sat on a corner of the sofa listening attentively to the conversation.

"I am still tired from that travel, you know..."

From the flow of events and the contents of what she had heard, the girl could easily infer what her friend wanted to ask and quickly began massaging her calves, in a clearly forced manner.

"Please, help me. It can't be anyone else but you!"

"Well, if that is the case, leave it to me!"

Solomon asked Mira in a somewhat dramatic manner and she replied with the same tone. It was enough to make the King deliver a joyful smile from the bottom of his heart.

"Man, this back and forth… it has been so long. I really missed it."

"Well, in my case it has been only a week since you made me accompany you on the hunt for materials for the Jail Shield."

"Yes! That one! The Jail Shield… in the end, not a single material dropped, huh."

First would be the refusal, then the begging and finally the affirmative answer. That exact sequence of actions was something they had agreed on to do, whenever one had a favor to ask the other. Considering Solomon's situation, the last time it had happened was over three decades ago, so it was with a cheerful laughter that he closed his eyes while reminiscing of the past.

"Never mind that, we are in an emergency, right? What do you want me to do?"

"Oops, sorry, let me see..."

Following his friend's comment, the King stopped thinking about the old memories that had flooded his mind, a tense expression returning to his face. Then, when he stared straight at the girl, Solomon remembered that Dunbalf, the Sage, had another ability on par with his summoning skills.

"Just to be sure, do you have any sealing gems with you right now?"

"Yeah, every single kind."

Mira answered the question as if it was a matter of fact. The "Sealing Gems" that Solomon spoke of was a general term, used to identify certain gemstones that had the natural ability to hold specific kinds of power. They

were primarily found in nature, but because of the refining technology created by Dunbalf, it became possible to manufacture them.

"Refining" was a special sort of ability. Basically, it was an entire technology that extracted, combined and affixed a variety of attributes and auxiliary effects. With those technical procedures, it was possible to enhance pieces of equipment with the special effects contained within gems; conversely, it was also possible to extract the power from an equipment and "seal" it inside the gemstone.

"Oh, that's great. Damn, I'm really glad that you came here."

As Solomon said those words, he gave a smile that expressed not only his joy as someone being reunited with a dear friend, but also the interests he held as the king of a country. To the girl, the fact that it was an expression she had been pretty familiar with only brought relief. It reassured her that even after an entire period of thirty years, that boy was still the same old Solomon she had always known.

"Well then, I will explain the details along the way. Let's go."

"Alright, roger that."

Solomon then threw open the door in a lively manner, slipping out a chuckle after seeing the surprised expressions of the three people that had been waiting outside. When he gave out a few orders, the messenger bowed once and departed in a hurry, an action also followed by Reynard, who left the place in order to carry out the instructions received.

"We have a special vehicle prepared for this. Please go."

The King beckoned Mira while asking Joachim to lead the way.

"Certainly, Your Majesty."

Upon answering, the Expert made an elegant bow directed at Solomon and another, in gratitude, towards the young girl.

"Okay, off I go."

"Yeah, I'm counting on you."

Both Solomon and Mira exchanged only a few words, but behind their voices that seemed to be hiding something, Joachim was able to notice an incredible degree of trust between them, unthinkable for people who had known each other for barely a day. He then remembered a certain phrase, faintly heard through the door to the office:

"*It can't be anyone else but you!*"

With a completely wrong idea about what had happened inside the room, Joachim guided the girl towards the garage, where the special vehicle was being prepared.

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Situated in the underground of the Arkite Castle, that peculiar garage was used solely to house unique and special carriages. Mira, who had been brought to that place, found herself in front of a black vehicle, its pretty modern look a result of remodeling and application of matte paint over the carriage's body. In addition, sticking out on top of its metal reinforced roof was a distinctive gun barrel, so it wouldn't be a stretch to say the girl was standing in front of an armored vehicle. Somehow, it seemed like that was exactly the "special vehicle" Solomon had talked about.

"I see he was pretty focused in his hobby."

"As for me, I really love it."

When Mira looked up at the familiar-looking vehicle and murmured those words, someone replied. He was the one who had traveled together with her that morning, the coachman—or rather, chauffeur—Garrett.

"Never thought we would meet again this early."

"Oh my, it's an honor seeing you once more."

The young girl narrowed her eyes as she moved them to the side, bringing Garrett into her field of view; while seemingly embarrassed, the military man moved and opened the armored vehicle's heavy-looking door.

"Please, Mira-sama."

Greatly resembling a common passenger car, the inside had a bulky couch dividing the front and rear of the vehicle. After observing it and lightly poking the armored exterior with the back of her hand, Mira went in and quickly sat down on the car seat, almost burying herself in its softness. Excepting that fluffy sofa, the interior looked particularly plain, with only leather and wooden boards filling everything. To Mira, however, it didn't feel bad.

"Ohoh, in contrast to its outward appearance, this seems rather comfortable."

"That thing was added out of necessity, though."

While the young girl was going up and down on the sofa to test its elasticity, Garrett heard her comment and replied, a wry smile showing on his face; of course, Mira would soon learn—the hard way—what was the meaning of that expression.

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After departing in a rush from the Arkite Castle, the armored vehicle moved towards the place where the group of monsters had been discovered, its figure roaring noisily on the road that cut through the grasslands.

(That damn Solomon, I never thought he would be able to make something like this...)

The Thousand-mile Carriage was simply no match for its armored counterpart in terms of speed, as evidenced by how fast the scenery outside

the window was moving. Having ascertained that fact, Mira shifted her attention to the person sitting in the front, Garrett. Amidst the mess that was the driver's seat, with a great number of different devices lined up, he was cheerfully gripping the steering wheel.

"This vehicle seemed so heavy at first, but now I see that it can run pretty fast."

From the windshield—that was short in height but large in width—the only things she noticed at a glance were the grassy plains and the sparse forest that surrounded them. However, when looking way further ahead, the girl spotted a certain white pillar, towering towards the sky in a clearly unnatural way. While observing it, she made her remark about the vehicle's speed.

"Of course, this is the crystallization of the most advanced technology from our Sorcery Engiiineering!"

As the military man answered, his voice grew to a lively tone and, even though he was still facing the front, Mira managed to catch a glimpse of his face, apparently beaming with joy.

"Hmm, Sorcery Engineering...?"

Having never heard about that term before, she expressed her lack of understanding through her words and tone. Then, in even higher spirits, Garrett started his talk.

"Yes, it's pretty amazing. I have been told that this is controlled by a device made by combining metal components with the stored power of sealing gems."

"Oohh… it uses sealing gems..."

"Indeed. Considering this Armored Jeep has been just completed, it includes most of our state-of-the-art technology. Because of that, however, its fuel consumption—gem consumption, in this case—is still significant, so we only ran it for tests once."

In spite of what he had said, his tone and mood kept growing with every word.

"But just a while ago, they suddenly came and gave me a great number of sealing gems, saying that I could use them as much as I wanted. Then, I was ordered to use the Armored Jeep to take you, Mira-sama, to your destination with utmost haste! Thank you very much!"

With a quick movement of his head, the man looked back and expressed his thanks towards Mira, returning his gaze to the front not even a second later.

Dunbalf was the leading person in refining technology and, with his disappearance, the kingdom lost the only person who knew the fundamentals of such arts; this resulted in thirty years of nearly zero advancements in that area of expertise. In addition, because the production couldn't keep up with the demand, higher grades of sealing gems ended up becoming incredibly valuable. And now, for the sake of bringing Mira to the group of monsters, said valuable items were being used without any control. While Garrett was

surprised at the treatment given to the Sage's disciple, he also felt incredibly grateful to her.

(I see… that is why he talked about those gems...)

Mira recalled how Solomon asked if she had any sealing gems with her. Basically, since the King saw the prospects of a great supply of those items, he decided to splurge. In fact, the girl didn't receive any kind of special treatment; Solomon simply saw the benefits of running a second test run on his Armored Jeep while simultaneously sending his friend to her destination in a swift manner.

No one held stronger feelings than Garrett if vehicles were considered. Not surprisingly, it was mostly because of those feelings that he took the position of vice-leader of the Mobile Infantry Force. Seeing that he had the chance to drive his number one favorite vehicle, unrestricted, the military man took the orders and received the sealing gems.

The Armored Jeep's performance was higher than what Mira had imagined, especially its frame that was reinforced by the power of a gem. Even while running over the monsters in its way, it didn't budge an inch; furthermore, when rushing at full speed on the trackless, unpaved path, the burden applied to that frame was almost nothing.

However, the same couldn't be said of the jeep's interior.

"Could you please… do something about this!?"

Mira raised her voice in protest while falling from the couch. All things considered, it was mostly because they were now pushing their way through the middle of the grasslands, after ditching the road.

As the Sorcery Engineering's most advanced invention, the Armored Jeep was built with a communication device, and was able to contact any locations equipped with transmission tools. When Garrett used it to obtain the latest data about the monsters' whereabouts, he confirmed that the herd was moving straight ahead, as if aiming to reach some specific place. On the direction they were heading, there were no inhabited lands, only forests and prairies as far as the eye could see; if one were to mention something special, however, it would be the flower bed at the base of the towering, white pillar.

With the information that had been gathered, they inferred what was supposed to be the herd's destination and rushed there. But there was a problem with that pacing. With the unevenness of the terrain, the entire vehicle began shaking violently, sometimes even jumping and moving midair for a few moments. As a result, every time it happened Mira would get launched up, only to have her small body fall on the soft and comfortable sofa. That was the meaning behind Garrett's bitter smile and words, regarding the necessity for such an item inside the jeep.

"I have spotted the flower garden. We'll arrive there shortly!"

In contrast to Mira, the military man was in top form and didn't have the slightest intention of stopping there, so the Armored Jeep continued cutting through the grassy plains.

"Oookay… I can, see it, too."

While bouncing all over the couch, almost as if she were in a trampolining routine, the young girl muttered a reply, her mind actually seeing a different kind of garden: the Eden one.

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After climbing to the top of a vibrant and small green hill, the Armored Jeep continued moving and, with its momentum, flew off that peak. Immediately, while fully enjoying the slight floating sensation from inside the vehicle, Garrett yelled in delight.

The other side of the hill was a gradual slope, ending in an area completely covered by grasslands and a sparse forest. From the vehicle's current place, it was possible to see a beautiful flower bed, its existence opening a circular gap in the middle of that distant, deep green. Then, standing at the center of such a richly colored place was the pure white pillar, a structure that evoked the image of a guardian protector's sword.

Having fixed her posture on the sofa, Mira strained her eyes and looked through the windshield.

"I suppose we were right, huh."

Being twice the height of the Silver Linked Towers, the white pillar was the target of a group of creatures, with every single one of them coming out of the woods nearby and advancing straight ahead towards their—supposed—destination. Since there was still a great distance between them, it wasn't possible to identify their species, but Mira and Garrett could at least confirm that the wriggling mass was indeed composed of monsters.

"Hmm, it seems that at this distance, they will be able to reach the place first."

When compared to how close they were to the pillar, the herd of monsters had the overwhelming advantage, to the point that even with the Armored Jeep's speed, it would be unlikely for Mira's group to overtake them.

"No other choice then. Let us go full speed ahead."

"At your command!"

Immediately after his answer, Garrett picked around three sealing gems and threw them, all at once, inside the small port that connected to the engine. Converting the power of those gems into its driving force, the Armored Jeep's main device started rumbling even louder, prompting Mira to ask the driver to take safety into account while speeding.

In a flat-out run, the vehicle continued its descent down the gentle slope, pushing its way through the densely grown vegetation—bushes and trees alike. Then, a few minutes later, they reached a distance that allowed them to discern the details of the group of monsters.

Trying to not look at the driver, who was completely fired up while gripping

the steering wheel, Mira directed her gaze to the flower garden, catching sight of the monsters casually trampling down that place. It was then that she noticed something.

"Hey, what is happening over there..."

As soon as the herd arrived to their destination, after so much work to get there, every single one of them prepared their special abilities, moved to face each other, and began a slaughter with their travel companions as the target. It may be true that they were an unorganized gathering of monsters, but there were also individuals of the same species there. Even then, regardless of that fact, they attacked anything that was in their direct vicinity.

"What the hell are they doing… hurry up!"

Obviously, anyone would know that monsters preyed on each other. However, that wasn't supposed to happen with beings of the same race; furthermore, if all of those monsters had a predator-prey relationship between one another, it wouldn't be possible for them to even march together in a peaceful manner, just like they had done a few moments before.

(Are they fighting over something that exists there? Or perhaps...)

Regardless of their true intention, it was without a doubt that the monsters had a specific goal. With that in mind, while bearing an indescribable sense of uneasiness, Mira lied down on the sofa.

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When the Armored Jeep finally stopped in front of the flower bed, a lone girl jumped out of the vehicle, almost tearing off its door in her hurry to leave.

"A Lesser Demon… I knew it, that guy was really involved in all of this mess."

Amidst all the monsters, there was but a single irregular existence there: with a body covered in wounds, it was a demonic being called "Lesser Demon". As the monsters continued to kill each other, their numbers decreased in the blink of an eye and, when the herd's size was finally reduced to one monster, the Lesser Demon was the one who cut its neck off.

"What a strident voice..."

In a corner of the garden, there stood the demonic being, cackling like a maniac. Mira threw a hateful glare at her foe and instantly summoned a Dark Knight. The figure clad in black armor ran through the scattered corpses, kicking around anything in its way and, in a flash, bisected the Lesser Demon. Subsequently, some sort of black mist flowed out of the wounds opened by that attack; however, after floating for a moment, it dissolved and dispersed in the air. Below that spot, on the ground, the remains of the slain demon were added to the other countless corpses, its face displaying what appeared to be a blissful, distorted smile.

"Damn, they really made a mess here."

When Garrett finally caught up with the young girl, he surveyed the surroundings and commented about the situation. The many flowers, that were supposed to fill their eyes in a colorful scenery, became tainted by the dark red blood of monsters; it was akin to the picture of a maiden laying on a place, collapsed, after having her purity stolen and sullied.

A section of the flower bed, however, remained safe from the pollution. The damage was focused only on the outer portions of the circular garden, somehow leaving its central part, or about half of the entire place, without a single drop of blood tainting the flowers.

"Well then, shall we go back? Oh, that is right, we need to take care of the corpses first."

If it were still a game, the dead bodies of monsters would naturally vanish by themselves, but then Mira remembered what happened right after she had arrived in that new world. When her Dark Knight massacred the goblins, the Magic Clothed Knights took the monster's corpses and burned them.

"Indeed. If we leave those bodies like that, a huge number of ghouls might be born from them."

Glancing at the myriad of scattered corpses by his feet, the military man said, "*I'm going to get something real quick,*" and ran towards the Armored Jeep. He then returned a moment later with two small bags in his hand.

"First of all, we need to gather everything in one place. Mira-sama, would it be okay for you to sprinkle this over the monster's corpses?"

As he asked the favor, Garrett presented Mira with one of the bags.

"...Okay, and what is this?"

After receiving the pouch, the girl found that it was filled with a white, fine powder. She then did as told, taking a handful of said powder and sprinkling it on the dead bodies by her feet, not forgetting to also question Garrett about the item.

"They are called 'Ashes of Hamelin'. Ah, you don't need to use that much, just a pinch of it will suffice."

Following his reply, the military man trotted towards the flower garden and began using the ashes on the corpses. In the end, he didn't tell her what kind of item those ashes were, so Mira decided to ask again later, after finishing the job of copying the guy's movements and sprinkling powder over the monsters' bodies.

The entire work took about ten-odd minutes, and the two were now by the jeep's side.

"Okay, let's finish this already and go back to the castle."

While saying that, Garrett took a few steps forward and placed a rectangular gem on the ground. After he returned to his previous position, it required only a few moments for a bizarre scene to unfold right before Mira's eyes. The monsters, that were supposed to be dead, stood up in a sluggish way and started walking.

For a second, the girl stayed vigilant of their movements, but after seeing the calm expression on Garrett's face, she remembered the name of the item they had just used and inferred its effect, finally revealing her understanding with an "*Oh, I see.*"

Their eyes lifeless, the slain foes moved mechanically towards the place where Garrett had set the gem and, one by one, lied on top of each other. Then, in just a few minutes, there was a pile of monster corpses gathered on that spot.

"I'm going to burn them now. Mira-sama, please get a bit further away from there."

Without a moment's delay after his request, the military man jumped on top of the vehicle and aimed the muzzle, that was equipped on the roof, against the mountain of bodies.

"Let's see, which one is the fire sealing gem… oh, found it. Well then, I'm shooting! "

Garrett manipulated something and, not a second later, a thunderous roar resounded as a ray of light was launched towards the corpses, being absorbed by them in the process; what followed next was a huge pillar of flame shooting upwards, so high it seemed to even pierce the heavens.

"This is… quite splendid, I must say."

While seeing the shower of sparks coming from the burning pile of corpses in front of her, the little girl muttered a few words in admiration. However, when looking over her shoulder and noticing the bright expression coming from Garrett's face, she let out a bitter smile.

Having finished the disposal of the corpses, both of them returned to the Armored Jeep and departed from the garden. As Mira took the chance to peek through the rear shield, all of a sudden, something came to her mind; it was the Lesser Demon's last moments, the ominous smile it had on its face even with a body already covered in wounds.

Because there were times when a demonic being would incite lower class monsters, the girl deduced it might have been the case this time too, with the Lesser Demon bringing the entire herd to the flower bed.

"Huuumm…? I thought that thing was whiter…"

Despite all that had happened around it, the towering white pillar remained unscathed. But compared to the last time she had seen it, the structure appeared a bit darker, almost as if it had absorbed the monsters' blood.

Chapter 13

A herd of monsters had suddenly appeared within the Kingdom. With her mission of suppressing said group of enemies finished, Mira returned to the Arkite Castle and quickly reported what she had found; afterwards, the girl comfortably placed herself on a corner of the sofa, inside the King's Office.

"Hmm, I could have relaxed like this if it were not for all that shaking."

Once again, during her trip back to the castle, she kept being thrown around inside the Armored Jeep, so it was with a relieved expression that she now stood there, gracefully sipping on her *Apple au Lait*.

"Who would've expected that a Lesser Demon would be involved in that matter... so then, the entire herd was killed, but it still achieved its goal, right?"

"Yeah, without a doubt. It let out that peculiar and annoying laugh."

While remembering the creepy smile that had crept on the demon's face during its last moments, Mira placed the bottle of her drink on the table, having only finished half of its contents.

The Lesser Demon's laugh. It was something well known among the players of Arc Earth Online; it was a sound that signaled the completion of their foe's goal. In other words, it meant that the demon had already achieved whatever its objective was, before being killed by the Dark Knight.

"This is bothering me. I'm usually busy with all kinds of stuff and now there's another problem I need to worry about."

When they were still in a game, events that involved the Lesser Demon were always troublesome to deal with, and most would leave a really bad aftertaste even if completed on time. Obviously, Solomon had experienced those events, so it was with a disgusted expression that he finished the report.

"So, am I also one of those problems of yours?"

Considering that she had arrived there not as Dunbalf, but as a "disciple" of his, Mira reacted to what her friend said about getting more problems to take care of.

"Oh no, of course not. Rather, I'll have you in charge of it… ah, it wasn't that long ago, but remember how I said that we couldn't announce right away your status as a Sage?"

"Hmm, yes, there was something like that."

"Then, I have a plan for you."

After placing the finished report on the edge of his desk, the King folded his hands and, looking almost like a commander from someplace[5], leaned forward to utter those words.

"Ohoo... and what is it?"

In response, the girl threw a sharp glare at Solomon and fixed her posture on the sofa, placing a finger on her chin during that time. While in the game, it was a kind of pose that the friends often did together when they were about to discuss things seriously.

"After you achieve feats deemed worthy enough by everyone, I believe that declaring you, the pupil of Dunbalf, as the successor to his title of 'Sage' would be completely fine."

What the boy wanted to say was that the girl's position, as the disciple of a Sage, gave weight to her name. As a matter of fact, only a few people would truly believe a little girl who suddenly appeared and claimed to be Dunbalf. And even if everyone accepted it as the truth, that drastic change in appearance would inevitably destroy the majestic image the Sage had, so the King had no idea of what kind of negative influence that problem would exert.

Additionally, if Solomon were to immediately grant the "Sage" title to Dunbalf's disciple, another problem would arise. That position, the highest ranking an Expert could reach, held enough power to directly influence the future of the kingdom; consequently, no matter how strong was the position of being a disciple of the hero, raising a featless young girl to the "Sage" ranking would most probably be met with unneeded opposition by the hardworking Experts.

However, what would happen if Mira appeared with a track record of great contributions done for the country?

"It will definitely go well… is what I can't say for sure, but I think that it's worth a try. Or more precisely, I want to do it."

Although there was also the option to simply have Mira show off her true powers to everyone, Solomon had abandoned it. The details were mostly unknown by the girl herself, but the succession of Dunbalf was currently something that held way more importance than she would've ever thought. The King believed that, to convince the neighboring countries of Mira's strength, she needed to provide proof worthy enough of the "Sage" title.

"Well, I got the gist of the situation. So, what are you having me do?"

When Mira asked her question, Solomon took a deep breath and crossed his arms. Then, while looking completely serious, a somewhat troubled expression appeared on his face.

"Dunbalf… no, from now on I'll be calling you 'Mira.' I don't want the risk of having your real identity leaking."

"Alright, be my guest."

"Then, Mira. What I want you to do is to search for everyone else."

"Everyone else?"

The young girl repeated her friend's words while holding her chin with a hand. She had no idea who or what Solomon was talking about; or rather, she couldn't understand what he meant for a moment, but after considering the flow of their conversation until now, Mira managed to think of something. After

that sudden realization, she furrowed her eyebrows and revealed a pure, annoyed expression on her face.

"Are you telling me that, besides Luminaria and me, there are more of the original nine Sages in this world?"

"Yep. And I might even be right to say that you're the last one to appear."

"What the..."

"Remember how I told you about the Friend List when you first came here? Give it a try and check it."

Just as she had been instructed to do, Mira operated her bracelet. After activating the secret menu, she opened the Friend List and observed the names lined up there, each one of them corresponding to a friend she had made in the game. Of course, written in white letters, were both Solomon's and Luminaria's names. Then, while searching through the other ones, when the girl finally found the names she was looking for, it was with a completely lethargic look that she confirmed the *white characters* there.

"Hmmm… everyone is online."

Mira checked the names of seven people. In short, they were the ones that, together with Dunbalf and Luminaria, made up the Nine Sages.

"Exactly."

"So, why are they not here?"

Because he verified that Dunbalf's status had changed from *offline* to *online*, Solomon could realize that the young girl, who called herself "Mira", was, in fact, his good old friend. Then, it was possible to guess that if someone's status was *online*, that person's existence in the—now real—game world could be confirmed. However, in the Kingdom of Arkite, homeland of the Nine Sages, Luminaria was the only one present.

"No idea. That's why I want you to search and investigate it."

"This is pretty bad. Where do I even begin looking for them? Except for the towers, they are the kind of people that will never stay in one place."

"Well, to be frank, I believe it will take some time. But if possible, I would like you to find at least half of them before the year ends."

Find half before the end of the year. What would be Solomon's goal in order to set such a time limit for the task? Without the slightest idea of her friend's reasons, Mira expressed those concerns.

"Wanting me to do that within this year... this is quite the hurry you have there. We have absolutely no idea about their whereabouts, so the job of searching for them is not something that a single person would be able to do in one—or even two years, right?"

Since their relationship was a long one, Mira had a considerably good understanding of her comrades. And precisely because of that, she was also pretty familiar with what she couldn't grasp of them.

"Yeah, I know that. But it will be really bad if we don't find those Sages

until then. Even your arrival here, in this world, was in the nick of time. I can't help but feel that this is fate at work."

Naturally, the King knew that the matter was a very difficult one to solve. That was why he wanted to entrust it to the person who would most likely be able to see it to the end.

The figure of that boy, looking completely tired as he wrinkled his eyebrows, immediately showed that something was off; from Solomon's expression and the tone of his voice, Mira could sense that their situation was quite dire.

"So, why do we have to hurry that much? Could you tell me the reason?"

When asked by his friend, the King retrieved from the bookshelf a folder filled with documents, and opened it on a desk right in front of the sofa. Inside said folder were the written records of a battle that had happened ten years ago. Mira then recalled, from the back of her mind, the conversation she had with Graia. After a *certain* battle, the number of monster appearances had increased.

"The Three God-doms Defensive Battle…huh?"

The girl glanced at the documents and, after checking the cover of that file, read it in an audible murmur.

"You know about it?"

"Yeah. I think it was something from a decade ago. Graia said that, afterwards, the rate of monster attacks greatly increased."

While glaring at the folder, she remembered the story told by the knight.

"Exactly. Without you and the other Sages, I ended up having to deploy an order of knights to take care of the problem; it happens so often that the military budget is shooting through the roof."

As he explained the situation, Solomon sat by Mira's side and took the half-empty bottle of Apple au Lait on the desk, tasting it in the process.

"This stupidly sweet taste… damn, it really takes me back."

"Hmpf, drinking it without even asking… I am sure that you, as a king, have a lot of first-class stuff at your own disposition."

"I'm not a genuine king, you know. I'll never forget my love for junk food."

Together with his retort, the boy held out both of his hands towards Mira; while one was returning the empty bottle, the other demanded seconds.

"Good grief. So, the reason why you have to be so hasty is inside here, right? After all, it was something that had happened long ago. Or are you trying to say that you just wanted to be stingy about your military expenses and have the Sages—myself included—return to help once again with the suppression of monsters?"

Getting rid of the empty can, she took out another *Apple au Lait* and handed it over to Solomon.

"Ahh, that's right… it would be a great help to have you guys do it, but there are more pressing matters here."

After his reply, the boy took a sip of his drink while turning the pages of the folder, stopping at a certain point.『Limited Anti-war Treaty』 was how the matter that occupied that page was titled.

"Hmm, and this is?"

Mira inspected the title in a quick fashion, averting her eyes from the tiny characters that continued right below it and, immediately, asked for an explanation.

"Since you weren't there, of course you wouldn't know. The Three God-doms Defensive Battle was something on a completely different scale than any other war we had ever fought. Maybe it will be easier for you to understand if I tell you that the rulers of the Beginners' Three Kingdoms, the *God Kings* themselves, took command there."

"What did you… **those** Immovable Kings acted?"

It was no wonder that Mira appeared surprised. The Beginners' Three Kingdoms were a group of nations that every player once belonged to, at the beginning of their playing history. Before new countries started being created, those kingdoms were already in the game, serving as a safety zone for novice players.

When the continent went through a surge of nations being founded, not a single one of them declared war against that group. And on the off chance that they actually tried doing it, no one would stand a chance against the powerful NPCs that resided there, characters so strong even top players would be easily destroyed by them. So, if the three kings of those countries went out to battle, it would be easy to comprehend the sheer dimension that the war had taken; incidentally, the "Immovable Kings" Mira talked about was a nickname given to them because of the fact that they had never moved from their places.

"It's called the 'Three God-doms Defensive Battle,' but because the Beginners' Three Kingdoms struggled at the frontlines, it was a war that involved the whole continent. It all started with a swarm of demons that came flying from the sky. Even though they mainly assaulted the Three Kingdoms, when reinforcements arrived they flew and scattered towards other locations too. Those demons then swoop down on the neighboring nations, greatly increasing the damage they caused, even resulting in the complete destruction of some of the smaller countries. That stuff was really harsh."

With an expression distorted in anguish, as he talked about that cruelty, Solomon certainly showed that he carried the determination of a king who was concerned about his people. Upon seeing that figure, the girl replied with, "*So that happened, huh…,*" and, even though she couldn't understand the matter completely, as a close friend she still worried about Solomon.

"Well, that great war happened ten years ago anyway. But you can easily imagine what was the situation post-war, right?"

"Everywhere was very busy with the reconstruction work."

"Correct. That's why, to restrain the nations from attacking one another, we created the Limited Anti-war Treaty. Simply put, it was a treaty stating that, for a period of ten years, anything related to waging wars was prohibited between them."

In other words, because all the countries in the continent were clearly in no condition to battle, for a while they had to focus on restoring themselves; as a result, no one was allowed to try and take advantage of the situation, waging wars against weakened nations.

"So basically, you are telling me that the time limit given by the treaty is almost over?"

From what she had heard up until now, Mira guessed that her friend's reason was a time limit. After the deadline given by the pact, its effectiveness would be void and, consequently, the ban on waging wars would be lifted. So, considering that the main strength of the Kingdom of Arkite, the Nine Sages, had been reduced to only one person, the other nations could take advantage of such a gap in the kingdom's defenses and attack. With its bountiful, gifted lands, and an unrivaled progress in the area of Abilities, if anyone were to take possession of Arkite and its wisdom, it would surely bring about great fruits for the victorious party.

"Honestly, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that we're being protected by this treaty. Anyway, we don't need the kind of war potential that would make others fearful of attacking us, but something that would at least help in successfully defending our country. That's why I'm asking you, once again. Mira, would you find everyone else for me?"

After closing the folder, the girl paused for a moment and stared back at Solomon's sincere eyes. Deep down, she already knew her answer.

"Sure, why not? I accept the job."

Upon receiving that reply, the King thanked his friend and smiled broadly.

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"Well then, now that we've finished negotiating, there's the matter of where and how you will search for them, but..."

Having finished his *Apple au Lait*, Solomon kept the empty can in his hand while proceeding their conversation with a sigh. The fact was that every single one of the Nine Sages was a very eccentric individual, each with their own peculiarities.

"Yeah, indeed. Those guys are not the kind of people that could be easily located."

"Exactly. The problem we have here is that the bad habits you all have are just too strong."

When the King affirmed that, he moved a hand and stared at Mira through the hollow bottle he held, letting out a bitter smile while saying, "*Just look at*

what happened with one of them." His eyes, however, shone somewhat cheerfully, for after thirty years, he was able to meet once again with his best friend.

Suddenly, at that moment, the outside of the office became noisy. Immediately after, having ignored the pleas to stop given by Reynard, a single woman opened the door to the room with such violence that anyone would think she had wanted to break it.

That person, who single-handedly snatched the gazes of Mira and Solomon, was clad in a blue and white robe, revealing an extremely attractive body line; furthermore, not losing to that perfect figure, her face was also finely beautiful. Indeed, that woman was so pretty she could easily captivate anyone that looked at her.

Taking a moment to fix some of her fiery, deep crimson and long hair with a hand, the beauty glanced at Solomon with her—also blazing red—eyes, not giving any thought to the fact that her actions were causing her ample bosom to sway. Finally, the woman's gaze moved and concentrated on the other person in the office, a young girl.

"What is with you suddenly barging in? I thought our appointment would only be later."

Without a single hint of his earlier informal behavior, Solomon talked in a tone that now exuded a dignified presence, his intense stare directed at the pretty girl that had just arrived. Then, the moment said girl heard those words, she vigorously closed the door; sadly for Reynard, his face was nailed hard by the moving object, causing the Knight to display an anguished expression as he greatly staggered, tears faintly welling up in his eyes. While placing a hand on his companion's shoulder, Joachim tried to comfort him by saying, "*No matter what you say to that lady, it will be useless, so please do not mind her.*"

"When I heard about how a girl, who called herself Dunbalf's disciple, was here in the castle, I went to take a look at her. But alas, I had no luck in finding anyone inside the guest room. Then, I saw one of the guards nearby and squeezed out the answer from him. '*Everyone moved to the office,*' he said. So, here I am."

The beauty moved to face Solomon and explained herself, her expression now revealing a bright smile.

"I see… well, whatever. Afterwards, I was planning on bringing her to your place anyway."

Following his reply, the King walked and approached Mira.

"This girl here is the so-called disciple of Dunbalf. Her name is Mira."

After being introduced, the little girl didn't even try to leave her seat nor greet the other party. She simply gazed at the woman standing in front of the door and, upon confirming that the beauty looked the same as ever, corrected her posture on the sofa with a wry smile.

"Ah, so it is her. By the way, Solomon-sama, is it fine to be using that kind

of tone?”

What the woman meant was that Solomon’s manner of speech had, currently, changed to one that would only be used when talking between friends; there wasn’t a single trace left of the previous tone he had recently used, one filled with the dignity of a king. That matter was something they had decided beforehand: in a situation where the two of them weren’t alone, both Solomon and the woman were supposed to behave in a suitable posture and manner.

“Yeah, there’s no problem. Since this girl here is Dunbalf himself, you know? So you can just drop the act and speak normally. Even after this many years, I’m still not used to that new tone of yours.”

While saying that, the boy had a playful and radiant smile on his face.

“Wha… w-w-wha...”

“Ooh, hey there, Luminaria, long time no see. Or that is how it is supposed to be for you, I guess. In my case, it has been barely a day since then.”

Still relaxing on the couch, Mira simply raised a hand to greet the woman.

Luminaria. That was the name of one of the Nine Sages and also the only Elder whose whereabouts were known.

“Got it. Dunbalf, huh? So you’ve finally arrived here too...”

The beauty then tried to get a good look at Mira, observing her whole figure from top to bottom. That cute, adorable little girl in front of her was enough to make Luminaria remember clearly an old conversation she had with Dunbalf, when they talked about their preferences in women. Currently, Mira’s appearance completely matched the characteristics she had heard at that time. Finally, while feeling happy to once again meet her longtime friend—but also finding that situation hilarious—Luminaria burst out in laughter.

Escaping through the door and reaching the outside, the faint laughing voice made Reynard cover his ears as both him and Joachim nodded to each other. Within the castle, there were rumors circulating that, sometimes, Luminaria would act like a completely different person. And in a sense, they were completely right.

When the woman finally stopped her convulsing outburst of laughs, she gave another look at Mira’s figure and, as if trying to imply something, smiled broadly.

“So you’ve also finally realized how wonderful it is. Having a woman’s body is great, right? Did you play with it to your heart’s content already?”

Then, the very first thing that came out of Luminaria’s mouth was some really indecent speak. However, even that didn’t change the fact her seductive lips, now raised in a smile after uttering those words, were also part of her charm, filled with sensuality.

“Do not put me on the same level as you. This was mostly an accident, I had no intention of having this happening to me.”

“Damn, that was some excellent work for an accident, dontcha think? I’m

finding it a tad bit hard to believe...”

After stroking Mira’s silver hair for a moment, the woman placed her fingers on the collar of her friend’s robe and pulled it, taking a peek at the young girl’s chest; even under the clothes everything was flawless, so Luminaria made sure to voice what she found.

“...Uughh. It will take some time if I were to explain, but...”

Seemingly irritated, Mira brushed off the beauty’s hand and briefly explained the events the led to her current situation, starting with the message that had warned about her soon to be expired in-game cash.

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“Well, I bought my current Vanity Case because of that too. But in my case, I didn’t use it.”

As Solomon finished listening to his friend’s history, he mentioned that the same message had arrived to him and, after thinking that it would be a waste to simply let his money expire, bought the Vanity Case in the process.

“Same here, dude.”

In order to prove what she had said, Luminaria opened her Item Box and brought out the same item, holding it on the palm of her hand. Then, while glaring at the case with a bitter expression on her face, a completely sulky Mira pouted and threw herself on the couch.

“Why am I the only one without iiit?”

“ ‘Cause you used yours, of course.”

Having her heart pierced by Solomon’s point-blank words, the girl could only groan in despair and, while looking exactly like a sullen kid, sprawled face-up over the sofa.

"But hey, that ended great, right? At least you didn't try to copy the image of some joke character out there. If I remember well, you said *this* was your ideal female figure, no? Well, even if this weren't your ideal or you had no attachments to it at all, your current state in itself is something to celebrate. For me, it was like I'd hit the jackpot when this world became real, this place is just the best shit ever. I spent the entirety of my first day here playing hard

with my body."

A truly refreshing smile appeared on Luminaria's beautiful face. Without a doubt, most men would get instantly charmed by it, *but only if they didn't know the real person behind that pretty expression*. And unfortunately, the other two individuals there knew really well her true identity.

While sending an icy stare towards her friend, whose behavior and appearance remained the same even after all the time that had passed, a certain question appeared in the girl's mind.

"By the way, I had this sudden thought now, but... Solomon spent thirty years here and Luminaria twenty, right? It is a lot of time, so why do you guys look like you did not age a single year?"

Because Mira had barely spent a day in that world, she obviously wouldn't feel that things were out of place there; what was baffling, however, was that her friends didn't change a single bit after spending a considerable amount of time in that new reality. Even if she disregarded Luminaria's case, it would be impossible to do the same for Solomon. There was no way for a human in their forties to still have the figure of a young boy.

"Oh, that's right, it's already so natural to us that we actually forgot to talk about that."

"Yeah, it's the reason why I said this world was the best shit ever."

In order to settle down and focus on the talk, Solomon tried to get his wheeled office chair and bring it near the sofa, but apparently Luminaria thought, "*First come, first served,*" and quickly sat on said chair. The woman then crossed her fascinatingly long and slender legs, with a clear intention of showing them off.

"Simply put, it seems that we, former players, are quite different from the ordinary people, or former NPCs."

The boy continued the conversation while poking his friend's head, retaliating for her audacity in taking his seat.

"Different from the ordinary, you say…?"

"Yep. First of all, I'm talking about 'Inspection.' Did you already try to inspect both me and Luminaria?"

When the King asked that, Mira remembered that during her audience with him, she had tried to inspect the boy, but no information was displayed. So this time, the girl attempted to observe Luminaria, who kept squirming around in a really unpleasant way. However, she couldn't make any kind of data appear in her field of vision.

"Nothing appeared, for the both of you. And yet I could do it for Suleiman and Graia..."

After hearing Mira's reply, Solomon let out a jovial laugh and quietly sat near the sprawled girl's feet.

"Somehow, it looks like we can't inspect former players. This is the first difference. Oh, by the way, when I first saw you I tried the inspect function,

but since it didn't show anything, I could confirm that you were an ex-player. Then, there was the fact that the name Dunbalf had changed to 'online' and, at the same, a certain disciple of his appeared—or a loli whose appearance looked perfectly fit for his tastes. That was enough evidence to convince not only me, but anyone else with such information."

"In other words, it can be used as material for decision-making."

Mira concluded with a bitter smile.

"Indeed. We can't be completely sure that the people you'll be looking for won't change their appearances, right? At least with this you will be able to identify if someone is a former player or not."

Said the boy as he adjusted the lower hem of his friend's robe, covering her legs with it; that skirt-like part of her clothing had been in a dangerous position, to the point that even her bloomers were exposed.

"Anyway, with how those guys are, we should be able to identify them without even looking at their appearances."

"You're right. For example, if Luminaria here changed into someone else, I'm pretty sure I would recognize her."

"Exactly. There are not many perverts like her."

Throwing a look at Luminaria, whose expression was of pure ecstasy as she ogled her own legs, the other two resisted the urge to laugh. Although the woman directed a sharp glare towards her friends after being called a pervert, she completely changed her expression all of a sudden, as if something had happened.

"Hey, in other words… if we're already at the point that we can recognize each other without even looking at our appearance, then we're **really close buddies**!"

Luminaria, who gave a surprisingly positive reply, stood straight up and, looking almost like a pro wrestler, made a diving attack towards the sofa. With nimble movements, Solomon managed to escape in time, but Mira wasn't that lucky; the girl had been lying sprawled on the couch, feeling completely exhausted, so she couldn't do anything in response to her friend's sudden attack. A moment later, assisted by the force of gravity, the woman relentlessly embraced Mira.

"Ohh, my friend~!"

"Hey! Drop that, Dumbnaria![6] ...Where the hell do you think you are touching me!?"

Switching their target to the young girl now, Luminaria's hands started crawling all over Mira's body, as if trying to investigate its every nook and cranny.

"This should be fine, right? It's aalright… OOOF!"

While making a scene fit for a clichéd drama[7], Luminaria, acting as the evil governor, laid her hands on the young girl, attempting to rape her. However,

that was quickly interrupted by a dull exploding sound, immediately followed by the woman's groan as the air from her lungs was forcefully expelled; Luminaria flew in the air for a moment and, after colliding hard with the ceiling, crashed onto the floor.

Still lying on the sofa with her face up, Mira had her right hand thrust towards the ceiling. At point-blank range, she had launched an ability from her secondary class, the Xian Expert, against the assaulting woman.

"Sexual harassment is pretty risky, huh."

Seemingly indifferent to what had just happened, Solomon called out to Luminaria. The woman then slowly rose to her feet and proudly gave a thumbs up, replying with, "*But I can take that risk.*" As for the girl, she got up from the couch while tidying her worn out robe and, with her eyes now completely awake, glared at her pervert friend to say, "*Next time you do that, I will be using it together with my Mystic Eyes,*" as an ultimatum.

With a clear intention of continuing her assault, Luminaria's hands were already ready to thoroughly grope Mira's body, but when she heard the girl's warning, the woman stopped in her tracks, both hands now wandering after losing their destination. Afterwards, she started picking up the documents that were scattered on the floor.

"Now that is something deserving of praise."

"Nah, come on, I just like to keep things tidied up."

"Oh really? Then, while you're at it, take care of these ones too."

Taking advantage of the situation, Solomon pointed towards a desk filled with even more scattered papers. Silently, Luminaria nodded in agreement.

Chapter 14

"Okay then. Continuing from where we have stopped, the biggest difference between us, former players, and the former NPCs is the state of our bodies. As you can see, it seems like we don't grow old at all."

While saying that, Solomon spread both of his arms and showed off his figure.

"And that is why, even after living here for thirty years, your own body stayed the same?"

"Yeah. To be honest, there's still a lot that we don't know, so I can't say with confidence that it's something absolute. Do we really never age? What if it's just our appearances that won't change and we're still growing old as usual? Do we have some sort of life span? Well, that's the kind of doubts we still have. Maybe we'll be able to understand things after four or five more decades have passed, I guess."

If they didn't grow old, it would also mean that their bodies would stay healthy, without ever deteriorating. The same would obviously apply to their skin, with its firmness remaining the same after the passage of years. It was mostly because of the very fact that their appearances wouldn't change that Luminaria said, previously, that their current world was the best; if a person was beautiful, it would be for eternity.

After her friend's explanation, Mira understood why their figures had remained unchanged. Also, it apparently was something that only happened to former players. What caught her attention, however, was how Solomon talked about a "life span." Evidently, no one would die of age after just thirty years, but what if they still died of other causes?

When they were in a game, every time a player was killed by the likes of a monster, for example, they would revive at their base or affiliated country and receive a debuff. The point was that, it happened *when they were in a game*. Now that the world became reality, would the same rule apply if they died? That was what worried the girl.

"By the way, what happens if we die here? Do we still revive with a debuff?"

"If we die, huh..."

As he listened to Mira's question, the boy made a troubled expression and crossed his arms in thought. After taking a moment to put his ideas in order, Solomon raised his face and began his reply with a few words, stating that the matter was "*still inconclusive.*"

"To tell you the truth, we've yet to hear about a player dying in this world. Well, my personal view on it is that maybe… we just die, I guess."

Blunt as it was, the King's answer was completely serious. Considering that the game became reality, it wouldn't be impossible to think as such. Even though she wished it wouldn't be the case, Mira also believed that such a

convenient thing would be too good to be true, so she easily accepted her friend's words.

"Is there any reason for you to believe we would just die?"

"It's because of the Friend List. I kept checking it every single night. And even now, just like you guys, it seems that there are others who suddenly arrive in this world. But the opposite also happened too. I had a friend whose status appeared as *online*, but their whereabouts were still unknown..."

At that point, Solomon stopped his explanation for a moment to moisten his dry lips. During that time of silence, the only thing that could be heard in the room was the sound of Luminaria bundling up the documents. Apparently, she was still working to keep the place tidy.

"One night, when I verified the Friend List as usual, that person's name had changed to *offline*. After that happened, I have never seen it return to the previous *online* status."

"I see..."

In that world, being online in the Friend List meant that the person existed there. On the other hand, being offline was a sign that they weren't in the world. From that, they could think of two possible answers as to what had happened with that individual.

The first one was that they somehow managed to find a way to logout. The other one was that, for some reason, the person had disappeared from the world; in other words, *they died*.

Believing in her friend's reasons, Mira decided to act even more careful while living in that new reality.

"Even if we're askin' whether we'll die or not, the most common cause of deaths in this world is related to actual fights. Well, I doubt we'd ever die because of that shit. That's how strong we are, and even if we're up against something we can't beat, be it a Demon Beast King, Demon King or Dragon God, we can simply use all our strength to escape and survive, right?"

While organizing the papers, Luminaria sat on the table in a seductive manner and spoke. Indeed, if it were those three in the room, they wouldn't be in serious trouble; during the four years since the official launch of the game, those individuals employed a great variety of means and ended up as one of the strongest powers in the world. So much that there was nothing that would beat them.

"Agreed, it is just like you have said."

"Yeah. And in the end, this is only a hypothesis I have. Let's just put that matter on hold for now. Currently, there's no need to find an answer for it, and even if we were required to find one, there's simply no humane way to test it. At most, I guess we just need to be careful not to die."

Returning to his previous smiling face, Solomon opened the menu from his bracelet and confirmed the current time.

"Okay then, since this is a rare occasion, I'm dropping my work for now, so

let's have dinner together. Just like the old days."

The King proposed that and rose from his chair, leaving the room to tell his wishes to his two subordinates outside. After a short while, with the preparations for their meal finished, one maid came to pick them up; the three friends then switched places from the King's Office to a big banquet hall. Being alone there, they would able to eat and chat without any kind of restriction.

"As expected of a king. What an extravagant dinner you have here."

Inside the hall, it was like they were in a standing buffet party with tables of food lined up before them. Holding a plate on her hand, Mira decided to try every single one of the dishes there and started taking turns, eating them one by one.

"Of course! That food was prepared by first-class cooks with the best of the ingredients. Everything you see here is absolutely delicious."

While also holding one plate, Solomon bragged about his banquet and walked towards Mira, standing near her left side in the end.

"There's even fried chicken here, damn! First-class fried chicken!"

Not even losing a moment to stuff her cheeks with the fried food, Luminaria praised it and, at the same time, placed some of that golden, perfectly cooked dish on the little girl's plate. To both of Mira's friends, it was already natural to have top grade goods to eat, but that look of excitement she had was a great way to remind them of her former self. Then, with her eyes sparkling at the sight of such a magnificent banquet, Mira served as inspiration to Solomon and Luminaria, turning their dinner in the Arkite Castle into a very lively event from beginning to end.

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After their meal, the three friends sat down on the edge of a stage, situated in the middle of the banquet hall, and merrily talked about their old days.

"This really takes me back. Even now, I can still remember its dauntless figure."

The boy closed his eyes and recalled the offline event he had went to, thirty years ago. Organized yearly by the JSDF[8], it was an exhibition where people could gaze upon military related items, from equipment to real weapons. Although the event started as a means to recruit new personnel for the Self-Defense Forces, it became a hit between military aficionados; as one of those enthusiasts, Solomon also attended it, making sure to adjust his schedule whenever it was necessary.

"Man, how I want to see the gallant form of the Type 10[9] again."

"It could have gone without you walking around everywhere. I am not exaggerating to say that it was the day I walked the most in my whole life."

"I freakin' gave up at that time. You told us you would cover for all our

expenses, so we accompanied you, but in the end it was a damn festival for army nerds."

In contrast to Solomon, whose expression was of complete bliss while immersed in his memories, Mira smiled bitterly and Luminaria made a completely sour face as both remembered their experiences at that time; yet, they still longed for those old days.

"Don't be such a killjoy. Didn't you guys have plenty of fun there too?"

The boy began swinging his legs around and, seemingly sulking, retorted. To Mira, it had been about two weeks since the events of that festival had occurred. Being told that all her necessary expenses would be paid and feeling like traveling, it turned out that her destination was a large venue, where all sorts of warplanes and military weapons were lined up. Looking back at the overall appearance of that place, still fresh in the girl's memories, the figure of the Armored Jeep suddenly came into her mind.

"By the way, what was that sort of armored vehicle you made me ride during the day? Instead of fuel, it used sealing gems to move and was even equipped with a fire cannon. I think Garrett said something about Sorcery Engineering or something like that."

When Solomon heard Mira's question, he stood up with a brand new smile on his face. Then, after walking to the center of the stage, he struck a daunting pose.

"I have been waiting for the very moment that you would ask me this. To tell you the truth, the Armored Jeep is the first step towards my dream!"

In a clearly cheerful tone, the boy began talking about his dreams. Eventually, he announced that, as a king, he would bring to completion a Type 10 Tank. Trying to go along with Solomon's enthusiasm, the other two sporadically applauded.

"Thank you very much for your attention. Oh! This is just perfect, it's about time for our appointment."

As he stood there, posing with both arms spread wide, the King took a look at the wall clock positioned near the entrance to the hall; after confirming the current time, he jumped out of the stage.

"Oh yeah, that's right. It was the reason why I came here anyway."

Remembering the original purpose of her stay, Luminaria followed Solomon and spoke.

"What? What time is it?"

It was almost like they had suddenly decided to change from reminiscing of the past to talking about their current reality; it caused the girl to ask a question in the daze of being brought back from her thoughts. Turning their heads to look at their friend's state, they gave her a smile brimming with confidence.

"Just wait and you'll see it."

"I'll show you how much this world has progressed."

Said Solomon in a playful tone, a moment before the beautiful woman walked towards Mira and, as if it were completely natural, took the little girl's hand and pulled her.

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Advancing through the corridor, the three went down a countless number of stairs. With every new floor they reached, the silence there would deepen even more, causing the sound of their footsteps to echo off the cold, grey walls around them, and violently ring inside their ears.

They had already traveled about ten stories down. At almost the same time that such a thought went through Mira's head, she finally caught sight of a large iron door and, nearby, the figure of a sentinel guarding it. As soon as the guard recognized Solomon and Luminaria, he made the traditional military salute from the Kingdom and informed that nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"Thank you for your efforts."

Being in front of others now, Solomon returned to speaking like a king and directed a few words to his subordinate. The same also applied for Luminaria.

"Everyone has already gathered inside."

"I see."

"In a short while they will commence the operations, but… Solomon-sama, who is that person?"

The palace guard directed his gaze towards Mira.

"She is Mira, Dunbalf's disciple. Her skills might be useful in the coming experiments, so I brought her along."

"Oh, that lady? Please excuse my rudeness."

After offering an apology, the guard took a card-shaped key and held it up near the door. Slowly, that heavy iron mass opened, only to reveal a white passageway that continued behind it. The girl then followed her friends and, as she went through the door, found something incredible on the other side. Around Mira was a scenery completely different from the usual medieval style she was accustomed to seeing; it seemed like she had just entered an ultramodern facility.

The moment she scanned her surroundings to get a complete view of that spectacle, the surprised girl recalled something she had seen in the past, when she watched a TV program exhibiting a certain foreign country's "National Aeronautics and Space Administration" agency.

(Well well, they seem to be doing something interesting here.)

Deep underground, a strong door and an experiment. It was simply obvious that they were inside a secret research facility.

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"Okay, we've finally arrived."

Indicating as such, Solomon stopped in front of a large door that, after a few seconds, began opening by itself, albeit at a slow pace.

"Now look at what you have here, this is incredible."

Behind that door, a white and vast room appeared. That space's height, width and length continued over a great distance, to the point that their limits could only be seen far, far away. Inside there, a countless number of what appeared to be machines were lined up, but what instantly caught Mira's attention was a remarkably large device in front of her, placed in the middle of the room. It had a cylindrical object, sticking out horizontally from its heavy-looking body, and a row of meters and gauges, positioned around it. In front of those instruments was someone clad in white robes; then, in the vicinity of that massive machine, was the figure of a person wearing an apron and a very conspicuous jumpsuit—still dirty with oil—discussing this and that with his robed colleague.

Observing that situation in the background, near the door from where Mira and the others had entered, was a group of people. There were eight robed Experts and five nobles, with the latter ones wearing some extravagant clothing that looked completely out of place.

"We have been waiting for you, Solomon-sama."

Appearing from the door's side was the king's aide, Suleiman. He slightly bowed to the three friends and stood by Solomon's side, waiting for further orders.

"Everyone, thank you for your continued efforts."

The moment he spoke, everyone stopped what they were doing and, together, turned around to give a deep bow towards their king. Then, when they raised their faces, everyone's gazes gathered on the unfamiliar girl there. Still not used to receiving such curious looks, Mira slid her feet sideways in an attempt to move away from their sight; however, when she tried to hide herself behind Luminaria, the woman grabbed the girl's shoulders and, with all her might, put Mira in the spotlight.

"This young girl here is the disciple of Dunbalf, Mira-chan. She has inherited all his refining techniques, so I am fairly certain that she will be of great help with today's experiments."

While voices filled with all kinds of emotions could be faintly heard around the girl, one of the nobles took a step forward.

"So she is that Dunbalf's… may I be allowed to greet her?"

"Okay, very well."

Receiving Solomon's permission, the nobleman walked towards Mira and kneeled. Seemingly around his sixties or seventies, with silver-gray hair and dense wrinkles on his face, the noble looked up and kindly smiled at the girl.

While looking like the personification of a sage's composure, the title of "King" appeared to fit way better with that man than with her own friend. Even his gorgeous garments didn't have an excessive amount of ornaments and were elegantly in order.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Edward Corse Steiner. It is the utmost honor for me to meet the disciple of our Hero Dunbalf-sama."

After greeting Mira, Edward took her hand and gently kissed the back of it. Although Mira would had instantly tried to brush away his hand, she admired how the noble acted in a perfectly gentlemanly way. Or rather, it could be even said that the girl was charmed by it. Obviously, it was because Edward's form was the very ideal she held of a male figure.

"Hmm, I am Mira."

The nobleman then stood up, bowed and began his return to his initial spot. As she observed his retreating figure, Mira renewed her conviction over the ideals she was devoted to. Curiously, no one there could understand why Luminaria, who was behind the girl, kept chuckling.

(...Wait a moment... Edward… did I meet him before?)

While pondering about that noble's gentlemanly behaviour, Mira felt she had already heard the name "Edward" in the past. However, just like a reflection on the surface of water being disturbed by ripples, no matter how much she looked through her sea of memories, the girl couldn't get a clear picture of the figure she was searching for.

"Well then, is everything ready? Let us start from the first phase."

Being brought back from her thoughts by Solomon's voice, Mira began following with her eyes the researchers and engineers that were moving around in a hurry, not forgetting to also look up at what was in the middle of them, the gigantic machine.

"This thing… it looks similar to the one atop that vehicle... the 'Armored Jeep,' I guess."

"The one you've seen was just a small prototype. This here is the real deal."

Some of the researchers there, after seeing Luminaria's gentle smile directed at the younger girl, were struck by the woman's sisterly allure, causing their hearts to beat even faster. On the other hand, as someone with the knowledge of who was behind that affable expression, Mira had a subtle, completely unknown emotion showing on her face while she slowly moved away from that spot. Then, at that moment, in a corner of her sight, the girl noticed some kind of device that was placed far away, in the exact direction the gun barrel pointed to.

(Just what is that thing there…?)

When Mira slightly inclined her body to get a good look at the object, her flowing and shining silver hair softly fell upon her shoulders and the many ribbons on her robe lightly swayed.

“Hey, someone’s staring really hard at us.”

“Hmm, what? You know there’s no problem in doing that. Just get this stuff ready already.”

“No, well… err, I mean, it’s...”

“The hell’s with all that mumbling?”

In the direction she was looking at, there was a researcher and an engineer carrying out the last adjustments on the device; when they caught a glimpse of that lovely young girl, whose eyes were observing them with great interest, the workers began a discussion.

“If my memory serves me right, she’s the disciple of Dunbalf-sama, err...”

“Ahh, yeah! It’s Mira-chan!”

“Hey hey, come on. Don’t add ‘chan’ to her name. You’re being rude, you know?”

“But, no matter how you look at it, she’s ‘Mira-chan.’ What else could I use with her name?”

“...How about ‘Mira-sama’?”

“Mira-sama… seems OK to me.”

Said the researcher with a grin. The engineer, who had the exact same thought, nodded in agreement. Then, although they were discussing something completely trivial, they actually started to work even faster—being watched by Mira was enough to put them in high spirits.

“The preparations are finished! We are ready to start the experiment at any time now.”

One of the engineers, the only one among them wearing a red headgear, announced that they were done with the arrangements. He was the one in charge of that place and also the person who designed the main part of the cannon being experimented that day.

Glancing once more at the huge machine, Mira could guess that they were about to start a firing test. However, judging by its appearance, it didn’t seem to be an ordinary cannon. That kind of mounted gun, able to shoot out common shells, already existed when it was still a game; as weapons commonly used by every country, the cannons could be produced by players who had developed the blacksmithing skill. But the ones from that time weren’t as big nor required a countless number of meters and gauges connected to them like the cannon in that facility.

(Let me see, the other one was small but had that much power. I cannot even imagine how strong the big version will be.)

Mira happily stroked her chin with a hand, eagerly waiting for the outcome of that experiment. In front of the many devices linked to the weapon were the researchers, waiting on standby. Meanwhile, the nobles were all lined up near the wall, watching attentively for the results of that test.

“Begin the experiment!”

“Start the experiment, now!”

With Solomon’s loud signal, the chief engineer repeated the order to his subordinates, who soon activated the main engine of the cannon. Inside the room, the high-pitched sound of a motor could be clearly heard and, at the same time, the needle indicators in the meters began to tremble. As the nobles had their breaths taken away, Reynard and Joachim stood on guard in front of Mira and her friends, observing the cannon with great care in case something went awry.

“First phase starting in five… four… three...”

As the countdown continued, the roaring made by the engine grew even louder, with the sound of electric discharges mixed in it from time to time.

“Two… one… critical point confirmed!”

“Fire!”

On the King’s orders, the engineer in charge pushed a lever. Immediately, along with a thunderous roar, a flash of light shot out of the barrel, with dangerously large electric arcs encircling the entire beam. The lone device, previously prepared as a target, had a curtain of light deployed in front of it, but when that torrent of destruction scored a direct hit, a powerful vibration spread and jolted the entire room with the impact; after a moment’s delay, a massive explosion sound assaulted everyone’s ears.

For a short while, when everyone in the facility witnessed that destructive power, enough to blow away the barrier of light along with its generating machine, they stood there in a daze, entranced by the weapon’s might. Its power was on a completely different level if compared with the cannons from the past, so the girl couldn’t help but observe with sparkling eyes that new model and its gallant figure.

“Wow, this is a whole new league of strength.”

Luminaria then placed her hands on both of Mira’s shoulders and leaned over, bringing herself closer to the amazed girl so that their faces would stay side by side.

“During the thirty years you were gone, we developed a brand new crafting technique. Then, using the Sorcery Engineering, we created this state-of-the-art weapon, the Accord Cannon.”

Having demonstrated enough firepower, the “Accord Cannon” was presented by the beautiful woman, who raised her eyes towards it with satisfaction.

Chapter 15

With the complete success of the Accord Cannon's firing test, the researchers and engineers in the facility began analyzing the obtained data; at the same time, the main members were in the development room with some documents spread before them, discussing with each other how to make use of the weapon and how to mass-produce it in the future.

As for Mira, she was also in the same room, but quickly moved away from the tedious government-related talk and decided to look for something in a shelf, with a great variety of things lined up there.

"Well then, Thoma. Looks like we managed to activate it with success in the first phase. But still, is everything alright?"

"Yes, we have perfectly suppressed the recoil. I believe it can already achieve something small for us."

Thoma, the person in charge of the experiment, answered the King's question while full of confidence. Solomon then nodded in response, visibly satisfied.

"By the way, how are you going to mass-produce the cannon? With all that firepower, our Wellesley House is obviously willing to invest in the weapon."

When one of the nobles eagerly leaned forward, the other ones also indicated their intention of helping.

"Err, regarding that, there's a certain problem..."

Saying that with a clouded expression, Thoma retrieved one document and displayed it on the table. Written there was information relating to the Accord Cannon's projectiles and the supply of materials it used as fuel.

"As you can see, a single firing requires one refining and two sealing gems."

The engineer then explained the theory behind the cannon. In short, they would first take a refining gem as the projectile. Afterwards, they would extract the energy from the sealing gems and charge the bullet with it.

Especially developed to store power with extreme ease, refining gems could be produced with the use of refining technology. Basically, the Accord Cannon acted as a device that could draw out the power contained within sealing gems, amplify it and then fire that energy. The refining gem, used as a projectile, served to provide a direction for the wild torrent of energy that was amplified to its limits. With the gem's tendency of easily storing energy, that raging power would be drawn to the bullet and destroy it, being launched from the cannon at the same time. The bigger the refining gem was, the more they would need to wait for it to get destroyed; in return, the range of the cannon would also increase. Finally, there was the last item. They required a lightning sealing gem to operate the Accord Cannon.

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“Because of that, if everyone here collaborates it will be fine to mass-produce it, but the main problem we have here is related to those gems, the sealing and refining ones.”

After finishing, Thoma breathed a deep sigh. The problem he talked about was the method used to obtain the required lighting and refining gems. Currently, several individuals in the Kingdom of Arkite held the necessary skills to create the latter; for the former, however, the most they could produce were medium quality gems, only enough to ensure the minimum level of operation for the cannon. The silver lining was that, even with such limitations, the Accord Cannon was a very powerful weapon, as demonstrated by the experiment from earlier.

Mass production was still possible. With some effort, they could also work out a way to supply enough projectiles. But then the weapons produced would only be able to display their minimum amount of power. Seeing how his beloved creation, developed over the course of many years of hard work, was being forced to use only a fraction of its original strength, the engineer glared at the documents in front of him, frustrated.

“I believe I have the solution for that problem right here.”

As Thoma stood there, looking sad, Solomon revealed a joyful expression on his face and placed several gemstones on the table—some of which emitted a faint light.

“This is… a turquoise and a moonstone. And here we have… a sealing gem? But Solomon-sama, the quality of this one doesn’t seem to be that good, how would it solve our problem?”

Turquoise and moonstone. A great number of naturally occurring gems had the property of storing power, exactly like the ones presented by the King; as a result, instead of just serving as ornamentation, they were also used for a variety of different purposes. Lastly, the ones emitting a pale light were gemstones that had already received energy within them. In other words, they were sealing gems.

What Solomon revealed on the table wasn’t something particularly unusual: all of those items were simply run-of-the-mill gemstones. Consequently, everyone there had doubts about what the King had just said; however, they also remembered how they heard similar words from the boy, with the same provocative tone, on many occasions in the past, so everyone chose to quietly wait for his follow-up.

“Okay, come with me~”

“Wha-! What is it now!?”

Coming from a corner of the room, the sudden voice of a hysterical girl made itself heard, instantly attracting the attention and sight of everyone else there. When the happy-go-lucky Solomon saw that, he couldn’t help but break into a small laughter. Luminaria was carrying Mira in her arms while the girl, looking exactly like a child, struggled as she was pressed against her friend’s bosom. After being placed right in front of the table, Mira scowled at the

pouting figure of Luminaria; a moment later, though, when the girl noticed that every single person in the room had their gazes on her, she quickly shrunk away.

"So, what do you need?"

Asking in a certain manner to keep up the appearances, this time she pierced the boy with her glare.

"Sorry. I have a favor to ask."

With a smile that said he wasn't sorry at all, Solomon picked up some of the gems from the table.

"Mira. Could you turn these into a refining gem?"

Towards Mira, he held two turquoises and three moonstones. The surrounding people then focused their attention on those items.

"Hmm, wait, so I just need to do that?"

Still, even though she stretched her arms to receive the gems, Mira couldn't take them because her hands were holding something already: two crudely crafted robot models she had found in the shelf, earlier. In her right hand was a red robot while her left hand held a blue one. Since the models had a tag indicating they could combine, the girl had been tinkering with them, trying to find a way to complete a bigger robot, but was stopped in the middle of the process when Luminaria grabber her.

"..."

"Err… shall I hold them for you?"

"...Yes, please."

Amidst that awkward silence, when Suleiman, in a reserved manner, presented a helping hand by the girl's side, she replied with a few words and quietly handed over the strange robots, each of them making clanking sounds as they were placed on the aide's hands.

Now unimpeded, when Mira finally took the gemstones, Luminaria appeared again, carrying a large board towards her. A few robed Experts then helped the woman by holding the edges of that huge object and placed it on the table.

"Is this a refining stand?"

The moment Thoma saw what was deposited there—a board with countless shapes and symbols drawn on it—he spelled out its name. A refining stand was a special tool used in the process of refining items. Forming a complex pattern on its surface were various figures intertwined together, each representing a different meaning: decomposition, combination, transmutation, conversion and condensation

"By some chance are we going to start a refining process here? Doesn't it take some time?"

Such was the question Edward had asked. It was a completely natural reaction, considering that currently, in the Kingdom of Arkite, even the most

skilful person in the use of refining techniques required thirty minutes to craft a single refining gem. In response, both the Experts and nobles who had knowledge about refining nodded to the man's words.

"Well, you will understand it soon enough after seeing this. Come on, Mira, I'm counting on you."

"Good grief, and I was just this close to figuring it out..."

Muttering complaints, Mira stood before the refining stand. In the corner of her eyes, she could still see the two robots being held by Suleiman; the girl was nearly sure that with a little more time she would be able to find a way to combine them. For that reason, Mira decided to quickly finish what she had been tasked to do. To start the procedure, she arranged the gems on the board and placed her hands on the correct positions.

A few moments later, the engraved pattern began emitting a faint light. While minutely controlling the degree of power applied and the activation of each of the figures on the stand, she decomposed the gemstones, extracted only their properties of storing power, condensed and finally combined them. In the middle of the flickering and sparkling light, the gems started transmuting into a different material. Then, just a short while after Mira began the process, she removed her hands from the refining stand.

"Ah! You can't take your hands off the board while you're still refin…!"

Although Thoma panicked, he came to a halt when he saw, with his own eyes, the swirling light particles that surged from the board, his breath taken away as he intently observed from above what was happening there.

"This is..."

As the light lessened, instead of the many gemstones that were previously arranged, what could be seen on the refining stand was a single large, transparent gem. With an expression showing his utter lack of belief as to what his eyes were seeing, Thoma brought his face near the limpid object and stared at it, getting so close he was almost touching that gemstone.

"This is a refining gem… no way… how is it possible to create this kind of thing in such a short period of time..."

He had a good reason to look astonished; Mira had just finished creating a refining gem in less than a single minute.

"I told you, she's the pupil of Dunbalf. Mira has inherited all of his techniques."

Solomon brazenly threw out his chest, as if he were the one who managed to do such an amazing feat. And rather than being someone who inherited skills, Mira and Dunbalf were the same person, so it was obvious she could do it. However, since that fact was a secret, the King's explanation was good enough; without objecting to it, the girl nodded in affirmation.

The maximum amount of energy that could be stored in each gem was something already fixed by nature, but by applying the same process that had Mira just used—combining multiple gemstones together—it was possible to

craft a refining gem. Because they could hold way more power than the other stones, refining gems were considered valuable and useful items.

"I knew that Dunbalf-sama was the one who created the refining technology, but I never expected that even his disciple would be so skillful with it."

Removing his gaze from the gem, Thoma now directed it towards Mira. That girl could possibly be the person who would allow his weapon, the Accord Cannon, to display its full potential. The moment he thought that, his whole body shook, the feeling of excitement arising from the bottom of his heart.

"Okay then, Mira. Could you also combine this here with the refining gem?"

When the boy placed three sealing gems on top of the refining stand, Mira simply replied with, "*Okay,*" and moved the new stones to the correct position on the board. She then started, once again, the refining process.

Similarly to what had happened before, it took less than a minute for the light to disperse, but this time there was only a shining, brand new sealing gem remaining on the board: the energy stored in the three gemstones had been extracted and injected inside the refining gem. With the process of refining, it was possible to combine together the power from stones and infuse a refining gem with it, producing an even stronger sealing gem in the end.

"There. Is this enough for you?"

"Yes, it's perfect."

Solomon picked up the newly created gemstone and nodded, completely satisfied. Instead of the faint glow emitted by the other stones that had been used as crafting materials, the refined sealing gem was brimming with light, its considerable stored power being clearly evident.

"With this, I believe we'll be able to solve the problem we have with the refining and sealing gems."

As he said that, the King handed the sealing gem to Thoma.

"Yes! Of course it's enough for us!"

After carefully placing the gemstone on the palm of his hand, the chief engineer replied while giving a smile.

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The moment everyone in the room began talking about matters related to the Accord Cannon, Mira, with the two robots in her hands, walked to a corner of the room and sat there, the models letting out clanking noises as she started to fumble with them again. Soon after, a man clad in a robe approached the place where she was.

"Mira-chan. Could I take just a little bit of your time to talk with you?"

"I am busy now so leave that for later."

While going crazy over the robots, the girl replied without even taking her eyes from their movable parts. Then, looking a bit frustrated, the man leaned over and implored, saying, "*Please, it's just for a short while.*" Mira sighed and turned her face towards him.

That man, wearing a blue and black robe, had a brilliant silver hair that reached his shoulders and, with his great facial features, looked quite handsome. When she saw his face, the girl recognized that person.

"Hey, is that you, Cleos?"

"Oh my, do you already know who I am?"

Obviously, that was the first time she had met him as "Mira". However, that wasn't the case for Dunbalf. Cleos, a half-elf, half-light-spirit, was one of the servants affiliated with the Tower of Summoning. If someone were to take an individual of the light-spirit race to the darkness of a dungeon, because of their special abilities, it was possible to completely ignore the need to bring a lamp or any other form of illumination. Incidentally, Dunbalf frequently brought that useful attendant with him when going inside dungeons.

"Ah… yes, I heard about you from my master."

When she had seen the man's face, Mira instantly recognized him and blurted out some words without a second thought; then, in order to correct that mistake, she replied with a safe excuse. Saying, "*So that's how it was,*" Cleos smiled, looking slightly happy.

"Then, let me introduce myself once again. I am Cleos, working as the substitute for the Elder of the Tower of Summoning."

"I am Mira."

The two exchanged a simple greeting. Immediately after, the girl recalled something about a certain term that had just been used by the Expert: "*substitute*."

"Now that you mention it, I remember Graia saying that there were people within the towers working in the Elders' stead. So you were one of them, huh?"

As substitutes for those who were missing from the Nine Sages, they were essentially the top individuals of their respective towers.

"More or less, you could say that I was forced into this situation. They recommended me because I was the one who spent the most time going on journeys with Dunbalf-sama. Well, it was mostly the same for the others, though."

"Oh, I see..."

It was a pretty simple reason, but not bad for a selection criteria. Purely speaking of strength, Cleos was indeed one of the best choices among Dunbalf's servants, considering the Elder always went out with him to extremely dangerous places. And just like Cleos had said, the other Elder substitutes were selected through similar criteria. Everyone had experience in being taken along to extremely high level fields, so whether they agreed or not, it was a fact that those individuals were strong.

“By the way, should you really be here instead of joining their conversation there? That is a really important weapon, no?”

Asking that, Mira threw a glance towards the table where Solomon and the others were discussing the cannon.

“It’s fine, don’t worry. We, the substitutes, simply came here to observe the performance of the Accord Cannon.”

“Hmm, ‘we’? So those over there are in the same position as you?”

Mira moved her eyes to look at the several robed Experts that were lined up alongside the wall, each one of them doing whatever they pleased, just like Cleos.

“After finishing with the important issues, they seem to be going over the mass production details. This is the area of expertise of Solomon-sama and the nobles.”

“And that is why you came here, huh...”

As the girl concluded, she returned her eyes to the robots in her hands, once again beginning to turn and bend their parts, exploring the places where they could possibly combine. Then, although the two continued with some silly talk, eventually it turned into a one-sided grumble by the Expert, who complained about the extent of the dangerous places that Dunbalf would take the people under him to; smiling bitterly, Mira simply continued the conversation by acting like a yes-man.

Chapter 16

"By the way, are you still using the『Rairinko[10]』?"

After getting tired of the constant and excessive grumbling directed at her past self, Mira tried to somehow change the topic and said the name of Cleo's most used summon.

"Oh, did you also hear about my Rairinko from Dunbalf-sama?"

"Ahhh… hmm, yes, you are right!"

Taking just a bit of time to ponder, in the end the girl decided to say that everything she knew from the old days came from what her "master" had told her.

"My goodness, this is a tad bit embarrassing. But, well, that means he talked quite well about me, huh."

While saying that, the Expert smiled happily. Even though he had thrown a barrage of complaints, the feelings behind them were simply of respect and devotion towards Dunbalf. Then, from the bottom of his heart, Cleos was delighted to know that the Sage himself had been chatting with his disciple about his servant.

"Exactly. I have heard lots about you."

"And just like you have just mentioned, my main summon is the Rairinko. Although I must say that it became much stronger than the last time Dunbalf-sama saw it."

"Oho, seems pretty reliable then."

The Rairinko was considered an above average summon amongst the summoning techniques. If it grew even stronger than the one from her memories, that summon would indeed be a reliable strength.

"I went through so much trouble to form a contract with it. But when talking about Dunbalf-sama..."

As Cleos began, this time he passionately spoke of how wonderful Dunbalf, the Sage, was. Undeniably, Mira had only dragged that servant with her because she considered him someone pretty convenient to have, but when she heard how highly Cleos valued her past self—mentioning things such as, "*That time he did it for me,*" and "*That was how he taught me,*" for example—the girl, embarrassed, was assaulted by a sense of guilt; she then mustered all her strength to not let those feelings show on her face and returned to her yes-man acting.

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"Then, with everything I have experienced, I ended up working as the substitute of Dunbalf-sama, taking care of the management of our Tower."

Seemingly satisfied, the Expert concluded his long history. To Mira, it even made her fondly recall some past events; from Cleo's point of view, however, it was mostly a narration of Dunbalf's heroic tales. After she listened to everything, the girl remembered a certain worrying matter that had occurred when she entered the Tower of Summoning.

"Now that you mention it, before coming here I stopped by at the Tower, but differently from the Tower of Sorcery, it looked awfully deserted. Did anything happen?"

The moment Mira asked that, Cleo's once cheerful expression gave way to a gloomy one, his eyes dangerously close to tearing up.

"Oh, hitting right where it hurts, I see… indeed, that's exactly right. The current number of Summoning Experts is extremely low."

"Uugh, so it really was that."

Considering she had visited the building during the night, Mira imagined that the lack of people in the building might have been caused by that simple, time-related fact. But when she heard what the servant said, the young girl could guess that the Tower of Summoning was suffering from a severe lack of personnel. As she dropped her gaze down, feeling depressed, Mira remembered how lively and crowded was the Tower in the past. She had to do something about that problem.

"If Mira-chan's the pupil of Dunbalf-sama, then you probably went through the same process during your first contract, right?"

Cleos asked, innocently, after feeling he had caught, for some reason, a vague glimpse of Dunbalf on the girl's figure, her eyes cast down while in deep thought.

The process of her first contract. During her time as Dunbalf, the only things she had brought with her for that task were healing items and bombs. However, Mira knew that the process the Expert was talking about was something different.

"Refined equipment and blast sealing gems, yeah?"

It was a method suggested and recommended by Dunbalf himself, with the intention of helping his followers as the Elder of the Tower of Summoning.

"Yes, exactly. With Dunbalf-sama's disappearance, for a while we were still able to form contracts. But after some time, the blast sealing gems were completely expended. Following that, all our refined equipment broke and, well... even with the refining engineers from this castle, we couldn't produce materials with quality as high as the ones created by our lost Elder. Gradually, the number of individuals who weren't able to make contracts increased."

"Ahhh… hmm, I see."

The method proposed by Mira was similar to the one that used a great number of medicines and bombs, but was much more efficient. Instead of applying the healing items to increase their stats, refined equipment would be used by players to raise their stamina and endurance; similarly, in place of the

bombs, they would expend blast sealing gems of the attribute that matched their opponent's weakness. As a result of using that process, the degree of difficulty for the Expert's first contract became incredibly easier.

However, since it was something backed by Dunbalf, with his disappearance the continued use of that method turned into a problem. Although there were a few people who could still use the refining technology, because the production took a considerable amount of time and effort, the price for the refined equipment had an inevitable jump. Furthermore, when compared to the ones produced by Dunbalf, those items were clearly inferior in quality. As a result, amongst the newbie Summoning Experts, there were many who couldn't defeat an Armor Spirit and, subsequently, ended up leaving the Tower. Finally, with the absence of its absolutely charismatic leader, the Tower of Summoning saw its numbers dwindle, becoming practically deserted.

"Alright, for the time being let me do this!"

With her thoughts collected, Mira raised her face and opened her Item Box to retrieve all the blast sealing gems she had there, letting everything fall and scatter on the floor. The girl then gathered every single one of those items and presented them to her servant.

"These should be able to help about twenty people against their contract targets."

"Wait, those are blast sealing gems! And on top of that they are really strong, similar to the ones from thirty years ago… no, they seem even stronger! Are you fine with giving me something so precious?"

Cleos was staring wide-eyed at the gemstones on the palm of Mira's hand, each one shining brighter than common jewels.

"Yes, for now this is the most I can do for everyone."

"But didn't Dunbalf-sama give those so you could defend yourself, Mira-chan?"

That kind of sealing gem was a very powerful item that, in times of need, could be used as a trump card. Because of that, Cleos thought that the ones in Mira's possession were given to her by Dunbalf, with the intention of protecting his disciple; even then, he still tried to confirm it first, swallowing his desire to instantly grab the items.

"There is no problem, I have the Dark Knight I received from my master. Besides, if he were here right now, there is no way Master would ignore the current state of the Tower."

It was in a roundabout way, but the girl managed to say what "Dunbalf" really felt about that situation.

"Indeed. If it were the Summoning addict Dunbalf-sama, he would probably do something to change our situation."

Cleos muttered a reply and, with both hands held out, received the blast sealing gems from Mira.

"Thank you, Mira-chan. After this I won't lose a second to contact the

newbies who gave up on the path of Summoning and tell them that everything's fine now."

The Expert bowed to Mira, a huge smile appearing on his face. Obviously, Cleos himself was also discontent with the present condition of the Tower and had taken a series of measures to combat that problem. Although he had managed to be fairly successful, in the end there were still many issues left to resolve as his methods still lacked a critical component. Then, seeing their dreams shattered, the young individuals who had gathered at the Tower, aspiring to become Summoning Experts, decided to leave the Kingdom of Arkite. For Cleos, who had continued to watch those figures as they departed, the gems he received had more worth than a 100 carats[11] diamond.

"Good, please do that. Oh right, you should have this here too."

Feeling that Cleos had tried his best to manage the Tower even during her absence as Dunbalf, Mira decided to please the Expert, giving another farewell gift. This time, she removed a ring from her finger and a necklace for her neck, handing both over to Cleos.

"Th-These are..."

"They are specially made ornaments that will, respectively, increase one's physical strength and power. With those, going against an elementary level Armor Spirit should not pose a threat of defeat."

"Is it okay for me to receive something this valuable?"

"Of course. My wishes to protect something are aligned with my master's. In return, I am definitely counting on you to do your job, Cleos."

"I swear on my name, as the Elder Substitute, to bring back the prosperity of our Tower!"

The man, seemingly elated, looked straight into the little girl's eyes and greatly nodded, his pupils shining with a fierce light.

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"Alright then, the second phase of the experiment will be carried out in five days, at the same hour."

As Solomon brought the meeting to an end with his announcement, the nobles and Elder substitutes bowed and began leaving the development room.

"Looks like they are done. Okay, Mira-chan, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I have to contact everyone this exact instant. Looks like things will get really busy from now on."

"Yeah, take care on your way back."

Cleos bowed very deeply towards Mira and, following what his colleagues were doing, rapidly left the room. Despite the fact that the other substitutes were surprised by the man's lively expression as he walked with nimble movements, they still gently observed his figure going further and further

away, until he was finally gone. Every single one of them did know how much that Summoning Expert was worried about his Tower's problems, but they already had their hands full with the management of their own Towers and couldn't do anything to help. Until that time, the other substitutes often saw Cleos displaying a very depressed look; it had been a long time since he was in such high spirits.

The reason for his happiness was, of course, the light of hope he had found that would help restore the Tower of Summoning. However, since his fellow workers didn't know about those circumstances, they misunderstood it and simply thought that Cleos, who was fond of kids, felt renewed after talking with Mira.

When everyone else had left, the only ones remaining in the development room were four people: Mira, Solomon, Luminaria and Thoma. The King, after reaching for the shelf of documents, secretly pulled a certain stack of papers that had been placed really deep in that furniture—it was so far inside the shelf that it seemed like someone had wanted to keep it hidden. He then looked over it with a serious expression on his face, grinning broadly from time to time. As for Luminaria, after the woman spotted Mira from behind, sitting in a corner of the room and making some weird rustling noises, she slowly approached the young girl and quietly looked at what was on her friend's hands. Incidentally, Mira was fiddling with the robots once again.

"Hey, are you still doing that?"

Seeing the strange shape that the toys took after being modified over and over again, Luminaria brought her face closer to the girl's shoulders and muttered a question, seemingly bored.

"This is incredible. Just a bit more and I will complete them!"

Mira replied with a carefree, childish smile; or rather, her current appearance was indeed that of a child, but the cheerful answer she gave was similar to that of a boy who was deeply engrossed in something. In her case, it was the modification of the robots, which she still continued.

Wondering what was going to be complete, Thoma searched for the source of that comment and saw the two friends sitting near each other. Pulled in by that curious sight, the chief developer approached them, catching a glimpse of the objects that were on Mira's hands.

"Ah, isn't that the『Super Combining Lord Vulcan』? Where did you find it?"

Apparently, Thoma recognized the robots the girl was playing with.

"They were lying inside the shelf over there."

Answering, she pointed towards the upper portion of the furniture that was in front of her.

"So it was there, huh. I thought I had lost it for good."

The developer gazed nostalgically at the jumbled up object being held by Mira.

"Oho, are you saying this is yours?"

“Yes, and rather than being just mine, it is something I crafted.”

“Whoa, really? That is a pretty good hobby you have there.”

“Oh my, I guess you could say that such a hobby became my main occupation. Well, I made it with the best of my abilities, but in the end that robot was a failure: because of errors in the design, the two parts can’t be combined.”

“What… did you say…?”

With an expression of complete disbelief, Mira awkwardly turned her head after hearing the conclusion of the man’s explanation; the smile she had on her face, as she stared at Thoma, was just a result of the girl trying her best to hide her own embarrassment.

“E-Errm… when I was including the combination mechanism, I ended up making a slight mistake with the width. Since I had to disassemble it first to fix that problem, I kept telling myself I would do it one day. But when I finally noticed, the robots were already gone.”

After taking a look at Mira, whose lifeless and somewhat scary eyes contrasted greatly with his previous image of her as a lovely little girl, the chief developer mumbled an answer and slowly moved away from there.

“WHAT THE HEEELLL!!”

It was a scream that could be heard from outside the development room.

Promising to rebuild the robot and later give it to Mira, Thoma managed to calm her down; then, feeling relieved, he received the Super Combining Lord Vulcan and left the room as if his life depended on it.

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“Huh, huhu, huhuhuhuhuhu.”

Ominously, a sinister laughter filled the place. Reflexively, Mira turned towards the source of that sound, spotting Solomon with a stack of documents in his hands.

“Finally. At long last, we will be able to start a full-scale development.”

While saying that, the King stared straight at Mira, his face distorted into a frightening, huge smile of delight.

“There he goes again.”

As someone who knew that boy for years, after seeing his current state and the papers he held, Luminaria could guess the reason for that sudden outburst. The moment Mira heard that, she wondered what her friend was talking about and tried to ask the woman its meaning; however, before the girl knew it, Solomon himself was already by her side.

“So far, our bottleneck was the production of raw materials, so we had to work with an economic design. But now, with you here, it’s almost as if I’ve

got a hold of the highest output sealing gems. Finally I will be able to say goodbye to the miserly idea of saving energy, we will develop everything without worrying about our consumption. This is a major step towards the Type-10!"

Looking completely excited, the King started speaking without a single pause, carefully telling Mira all the hardships he had to go through before she arrived. According to him, in order to work flawlessly on a practical level, the cannon would need to consume several hundreds of magic sealing gems; and simply preparing that many gems would take half a year. Obviously, it was impossible to consider that amount of time as something "*practical*," Solomon fervently explained.

"The Sorcery Engineering is still advancing and it will be able to do much more in the future. And that's why I saw a possibility there. Especially, depending on the class of the sealing gem used, the difference in output is something incredibly amazing. You see, the higher the gem's class is, the higher the—"

"Okay okay, that's enough. Dude, look at her, she's nearly dozing off already."

Noticing the steady growth in the boy's enthusiasm with his speech, Luminaria appeared and brought him to a stop. Rather than doing it just because it was a convoluted topic, the effects of continuously listening to a talk that focused mostly on Solomon's hobbies could be clearly seen on Mira; as the girl's head began drowsily swaying, her friend decided to act.

"Hmm, then it can't be helped, I guess."

Easily accepting the woman's argument, Solomon withdrew and returned the documents to their place inside the shelf. Nevertheless, it did not actually mean that his fervent passion had subsided. The boy simply believed that, from now on, he would be able to have Mira accompany him as much as he liked. *His best friend was there*. For the time being, that was good enough to Solomon.

"Hey, wake up."

While poking the girl's cheek, Luminaria called out to Mira.

"Oh no, I am not sleeping."

Came her reply as she brushed off her friend's hand and glared, with firm eyes, at that woman. A moment later, however, Mira's eyelids lost strength and, when they were about to completely close, she managed to regain herself, once again forcing her eyes wide open.

"But you wanna hit the sack, right?"

"Yeah."

She immediately answered.

"By the way, did you take a bath already?"

"I will take one tomorrow."

Upon hearing the girl's reply to her second question, Luminaria's expression completely changed.

"Nope, you must be nuts. There's just no way that someone would choose to not enter a bath after becoming a woman!"

Although that was simply her friend's opinion, while already trying her best to keep herself awake, Mira had no strength left to object.

"Okay, we're going!"

The moment she said that, in a scene similar to a kidnapping attempt, Luminaria grabbed and ran away with the young girl in her arms.

(There are so many things wrong with this… but maybe I will be able to enjoy what is coming next.)

Being left behind, Solomon saw his two best friends disappearing from the room, a happy smile on his face. Then, alone, he slowly walked towards the men's bath.

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"Why do we have to go in together?"

As the fragrance of the bath reached the tip of her nose, the drowsiness that had been restraining Mira lessened a bit and, since she was already there, the girl decided to get into the water. Of course, the main reason for that choice was her curiosity over the enormous bath in the castle.

"C'mon, it's fine, the place is really large. And since it's been so long since we've last met, let's just go there naked and socialize!"

After being carried by her friend, the girl finally reached the dressing room of the castle's large bath.

Luminaria, already used to undressing herself, folded and placed her clothes on the clothing shelf; in contrast to the woman, Mira was still struggling with her robe covered in ribbons, something that had been personally customized by the aides, Litalia and Mariana.

"Geez, let me help you."

Standing in front of the young girl, with dexterous hands Luminaria began untying the ribbons, one by one. At the same time, majestically emphasized before Mira's eyes was the voluptous object of that woman's obsession. Since she couldn't possibly look straight at it, the girl forced her eyes to wander around the place. Then, after Luminaria's efforts, there was a total of twenty ribbons lined up on the shelves. With those items removed, the robe returned to its original form as the hemming that had been prepared came undone. Finally, when the woman took off the ribbon-shaped hair band that had been fastened around Mira's body, the robe's collar opened to the point that the girl's shoulders could be seen, revealing through a small opening her modest chest; the moment Luminaria noticed it, she gave an approving smile.

“Hmm, I see that even this part of your body fits your tastes.”

“Just drop that topic already...”

While dragging the lower hem of her garment on the ground, Mira walked towards a corner of the room, brought her arms inside her robe and, after squirming around, finally removed it. With the faux magical girl-esque attire out of the way, the only thing remaining on Mira’s figure was her underwear: the Robe of the Celestial Maiden and the bloomers. That ended up being enough to, once again, incite Luminaria’s attack.

“Damn, wearing a see-through lingerie together with the old-fashioned bloomers… even though you’ve barely spent a day in this world, look at how much you’ve grown up. At this rate you’ll reach my level soon enough.”

The combination of a childish, bewitching see-through garment and the seemingly unattractive bloomers made the red-haired woman discover something new. Throwing the robe that was in her hands towards that pervert, Mira hurriedly stripped off her remaining clothes and ran in the direction of the bath. Luminaria carefully folded her friend’s garb and placed it on the clothing shelf, afterwards joining the same place as Mira.

Considering it resided inside the castle where the King lived, that bath was so splendid it would never bring shame to its royal location. The large bathtub was always filled with warm water; in the middle of that place, looking almost like a fountain, hot water was gushing out towards the ceiling and, with the gravity’s attraction, kept showering the surroundings, incessantly.

Since even visitors were allowed to use that bath, it had been packed with things to show off how grand the kingdom was. Consequently, since she had already decided to fully enjoy that completely new world, it was possible to guess Mira’s current state inside such a luxurious bath.

“This is crazy! This thing here is completely ridiculous!”

With the rest of her sleepiness blown away by that spectacle, Mira was cackling right below the fountain, basking under the water that fell there. In an instant, after absorbing the moisture around it, the girl’s hair began sticking to her body and droplets of water slowly flowed down her soft, fair skin. Such a place felt ridiculously extravagant, even when compared to a high class spa; and in that bath, the girl was now kicking around the hot water that poured out of the fountain, all the while savoring the pleasure of swimming around that place.

“Now that I look at it, she’s really acting fit for her appearance, huh. Well, from the beginning that guy always had that childish side of him. But are you perfectly fine with this, Dunbalf?”

Luminaria muttered to no one in particular as she, looking somewhat pleased, observed her friend’s antics.

In the bath, a familiar theme song from a certain anime could be heard; while deeply submerged in the bathtub and getting completely relaxed, the woman had began humming to herself. Then, after glancing at the singing Luminaria for a second, Mira returned to the dressing room, feeling refreshed as her mind and body were healed by the hot bath.

Since the garments that the girl had left on the shelf had been sent to the

laundry, a change of clothes was placed there for her use. However, the moment she took that article of clothing and unfolded it, Mira instantly froze; what she saw in her hands was a frilled, sky-blue dress. At her own discretion, a maid had mustered all her strength to find an outfit that would best suit Mira.

Yet, that wasn't the only problem. Or rather, that simple dress was overshadowed by something else that had been prepared next to it: white panties decorated with a small ribbon. Although it looked plain, that piece of clothing was showing how it was still possible to further boost Mira's already perfect allure. *There was no need for the other useless stuff, just wearing those panties was good enough*. *She would then be able to reach the supreme body… no, the* ***embodiment*** *of her tastes*[12]. That was what the underwear told the girl.

Promptly, Mira opened her Item Box and tried to find something to use as a replacement for those clothes. But just like the other night, when she verified its contents, there was only the reaffirmation that she could not escape her fate. In order to recompose herself, the girl casually averted her sight from the panties. The moment she did that, before her eyes appeared a beautiful girl, one that would probably look pretty well with the underwear Mira had been trying to forget.

"Hmm… ahh, there is a mirror here..."

That cute, stark naked girl was none other than Mira herself, her body reflected in a large, full-length mirror. After staring at that figure with great intensity,

"I am… so cute."

Was what she murmured. Since becoming Mira, the first time she saw her own figure was on the mirror-like armor of the Magic Clothed Knights. Then, the next one was on a window, dyed by the dark of the night. As a result, after seeing her perfectly detailed reflection on the mirror, the girl became thoroughly captivated by her own charms; in the process, she was reminded even further of her own preferences.

Mira continued to observe the mirror as she wiped her body with a bath towel and, for some reason, began touching her face. After starting with her cheeks, she kept moving her fingertips and reached the lips; following that, her fingers slowly ran down towards the nape of her neck. Once she removed her hands from that place, Mira directed her attention to the sleek, fluttering silver hair on her head and began to gently comb it.

"I welcome you to my side of the world. Greetings, my friend."

Engrossed in her own stupid world, the girl was taken by surprise and, startled, straightened her back, looking towards the source of the female voice that had tried to imply something about her. There, Mira found the figure of Luminaria, a triumphant and warped smile on that woman's face.

"How long… have you been here?"

" *'I am… so cute.'* "

A second later, the young girl used【Way of the Xian: Shukuchi】to charge

against Luminaria. However, as if it was an illusion, the woman's figure flickered and she easily evaded the attack.

"Hey, what the hell is that? I have never seen that kind of movement before."

Luminaria seemed to have disappeared all of a sudden. Needless to say, Mira found herself fascinated by those never-seen movements; among all the skills she knew, there was nothing that would have caused those motion effects.

"Don't go thinkin' that the only progress we made during your absence was the Sorcery Engineering. It's been thirty years, yanno? Day by day, all sorts of skill classes made steady progress too."

Together with her illusion, the woman kept appearing and disappearing. When Mira saw that, she completely forgot all the embarrassment she had been feeling a moment earlier, the girl's head now filled with her curiosity over that brand new ability.

"I think this one was developed eight or so years ago, the evasion skill【Mirage Step】. Its effects are, well... exactly what you're seeing now."

Explained Luminaria as she continued to leave behind afterimages while doing her movements.

"There are some conditions to learn it. If I remember, first, you need to possess mana, and second, you must have acquired the divine protections of light and water."

"Oooh! Then it means I am able to learn it immediately. Teach me!"

Aware that she met all the conditions to obtain that ability, Mira strongly demanded the woman to instruct her.

"Whaaat? I wonder~... why would I teach it to you for free? That was something produced through many years of effort and history, yanno~?"

Replied the unwilling Luminaria. He—or rather, she— knew, from the very beginning, about Mira's striking and insatiable tenacity when it came to skills.

"Hmpf, never mind then. Solomon probably has that ability too."

While saying that, the girl threw her bath towel. Then, after receiving it, Luminaria used the towel to cover her hands, as if hiding something.

"Hey, wanna guess what I have here?"

Like a magic trick, the moment the woman flung the cloth high into the ceiling, a book appeared on her previously empty hands. Written on its cover was『Skills Compendium - 2146 edition.』.

"No… no way… is that what I think it is?"

The "Skills Compendium" was a huge bestseller, created in order to collect in one single book the countless number of diverse skills that had been appearing. Obviously, as a skills aficionado, Mira had one copy, but it was the『Skills Compendium - 2116 edition.』. In other words, a book from three decades ago.

It wasn't a surprise, then, that Mira couldn't take her eyes from her friend's compendium. Even in the four years since the opening of the game's servers, various kinds of abilities were either discovered or developed; as a result, the **thirty years** of wisdom written in the book held by Luminaria was inestimable.

"Currently, this valuable book is heavily limited, to the point that no matter how much money you accumulate, you still won't be able to get one. So, what if I said that I'm willing to give this one to you?"

"...What do you want in return?"

The young girl asked, going directly to the point. In Luminaria's case, she had already finished reading all the instructions written in that compendium; however, she knew exactly how attractive that book was to the current Mira. Since the woman brought it out, she had no intention of giving it for free. That fact was also obvious from the pretentious tone Luminaria had just used.

"Good, this won't take long, then. Anyway, considering it's you we're talking about, it won't be hard to achieve. I heard from Solomon that you're going to search for those guys. So while you're at it, I just want you to get your hands on two items."

"Oho. Then, what is your request?"

"The first item is the Sword of the Red Lotus King, and the second one is the Yggdrasil's Charcoal."

"Hmmm… they are pretty rare. But well, it is not like I cannot get them. The problem is that the same thing applies to you. Why would you bother asking me to collect them?"

Both the items mentioned by the red-haired woman were first-class treasures. On the other hand, with Mira's strength, they wouldn't be impossible to obtain.

"As you know, I can't take a single step out of this country. There's also the development of our Accord Cannon, but damn… the biggest problem is that I have to, by any means necessary, avoid giving the other countries a reason to attack us. Like carelessly crossing our national borders, for example. I'll have you know that I'm considered a big shot in this world."

While saying that, Luminaria threw out her ample bosom, full of pride, and raised the corners of her mouth in a fearless smile.

"I see. Since the beginning this game was pretty realistic. But now it *became* reality itself, huh. Indeed, if that is the case, then it might be easier for me to move around."

"Right? That's why I'm counting on you. If you complete my request, this thing here will be yours."

She replied and, at the same time, as if trying to show off, patted Mira in the head with the book.

"Okay, okay, I accept it. However, what are you going to do with the sword? I believe that using Sorcery is faster and stronger, no? And what are

you using the charcoal for? From what I remember, it was a material used for alchemy. Did you not say that packing too many professions was not your cup of tea?"

Luminaria was a Sorcery Expert. And the highest ranking one to boot. But no matter how rare the Sword of the Red Lotus King was, it would only display its true worth when equipped by an advanced Swordsman. A Sorcery Expert would never be able to master its use; and even if their intention was to employ flame attacks, using【Sorcery：Dual Blaze】, for example, would be overwhelmingly better in terms of efficiency. Then, since Luminaria had a hard time dealing with delicate works, she completely ignored alchemy, so Mira had no idea why her friend would need Yggdrasil's Charcoal, an ingredient required for the Secret Gem of Purification.

"Well, I'm not planning on using them normally. They will just work as a catalyst."

Completed the woman as she lightly hit Mira's head with the compendium, following a rhythm. Raising her eyes, the girl glared at her aggressor.

"Catalyst…? Wait, by any chance are you talking about a catalyst used to learn spells!?"

"Correct. Long ago, I found a completely new pentagram. And after analyzing it, the information I got was that those two items should be used as its catalyst."

As their conversation continued, Mira took the opportunity to strike and stretched out her hands towards the book on her head. Sadly for the girl, though, they uselessly grabbed nothing.

"To think that even new abilities were developed… those thirty years were amazing. But hey, you just mentioned something about 'analyzing,' right? What is that? Were you not supposed to randomly expend different materials until you actually found the right catalysts? If you apply that 'analysis' method, can you really discover the right ones?"

"Yes, it's a new skill that evolved from Appraisal, the【Technical Analysis】. Of course, inside this book you'll find the information related to this new ability."

After answering Mira's question, Luminaria held the compendium right before the girl's eyes. In an instant, faster than the eye could see, Mira stretched out her hands, only to grab an afterimage.

"Ughh."

"You're exactly thirty years too early to even think of defeating me. Now then, what are you going to do? I'm givin' this to you if you find those items for me."

"Okay, I accept those terms."

Turning her head to look at her friend, who used Mirage Step to sneak around her back, the girl consented, her eyes sparkling at the sight of that skill.

"But only on one condition."

"Hm? And what is it? Travel expenses? Some tools you would need? I believe Solomon's going to provide those already, man."

"Oh no, I just want you to teach me how to use that illusion-like ability."

With an expectant expression on her entire face, she looked up towards Luminaria. After receiving such an indirect attack, even the deeply experienced woman felt her heart skip a beat.

"You know quite well how to use that body of yours, huh? Fine. Think of this as an advance payment."

Then, inside the dressing room, a temporary study session between two naked ladies began.

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Before long, the teaching of the skill finished. Once she got the gist of it, Mira didn't have any problem using the ability. But maybe because of the difference in training experience, when compared to Luminaria, the girl's roughness was evident. Nevertheless, that was and would always be the point of diligently practising.

As they completed their study session, the stark naked friends finally started dressing themselves.

"Wait what. Are you really hesitating there? You better give up now since you'll have to deal with this same shit for your entire life. If you're going to freak out with every single thing you'll just end up wasted."

While putting on the clothing that was prepared to her, Luminaria looked at Mira, who stood still with the dress and panties in her hands, and complained. She'd only needed a second to understand what was happening.

"But... you see..."

Murmured the girl as she turned her face towards Luminaria and stared at that robed figure, eyes wide open.

"Why do you have a robe to wear…?"

"Come on, I often come here, you know? If it's a change of clothes, I have plenty enough of them."

"Then lend one for me. No way I am going to wear these."

"They would never fit you, look at the difference in our sizes. And no matter how I look at it, those you have there will really suit you, so don't worry and wear them already. I could even give you a hand too."

Luminaria completed, a suspicious smile on her face as she gradually approached Mira.

"I can do it myself!"

Immediately after replying, the girl left an illusion behind, escaping to the other side of the room. She then took a deep breath, readying herself, and pushed her head through the skirt of the one-piece dress. A few moments later, feeling her wet hair getting cramped inside the garment, Mira used one hand to force that shining silver hair out.

Finally, the only thing left was the panties. Inside her head, two different options waged war: one would result in her going commando and the other would cause her to lose something dear to her very being. The latter option was strongly backed by how short was the hem of her dress; the former option, however, was desperately defended by the last line she didn't want to cross, as someone who was once considered a **man among men**, the great Dunbalf.

In spite of that, when it appeared that Mira's internal struggle would continue indefinitely, a single person's hands were enough to quickly bring an end to that fight.

"Why are you still at it? Damn..."

Said Luminaria as she took the underwear from her friend's hands and crouched down, preparing it near the girl's feet.

"Come on, lift one leg."

"No… like I said..."

"Hurry up already, dude."

Trying to urge Mira, the woman poked the girl's leg. Reluctantly, the moment she slightly lifted one leg, her red-haired friend did not miss the chance and swiftly placed one side of the panties through the raised foot. "*Now the other one, come on*," the woman urged, once again. Resigned, the young girl did as told and, in the end, had someone putting underwear on her. It was almost like a reenactment of the bloomers incident.

Being made to magnificently lose something dear to her, before finally leaving the dressing room, it appeared that, instead, Mira had achieved enlightenment.

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The visitor's bedrooms were located near the maid's quarters. After being guided there, the girl immediately slipped into the bed.

(Today was pretty busy, huh.)

Mira thought while remembering the events that had happened in a single day. She now had to live in that new world, a game that turned into reality. But she didn't feel too anxious about it, as her friends were there to encourage her. She couldn't go clean and confess, however, that it was because of those two individuals that she felt at ease. *It would be too embarrassing*. Amidst such thoughts, the girl fell asleep.

Chapter 17

It was early in the morning and, inside a bedroom within the Arkite Castle, Mira was dozing off, dreaming. However, a sudden and strong knocking on the door forced her to wake up.

"Uugh..."

When she looked around, the girl felt she was in an unfamiliar and extravagant room. That sense of strangeness did not last long, though, as Mira recalled and grasped the situation she was in. Since the sounds coming from the door still continued, she got up from the bed and opened it, wondering what could possibly be happening.

"Ah... good morning, Mira-sama."

For a moment, the palace guard outside the room found himself a little dazed at the sudden appearance of Mira, whose clothes were worn out and loose; yet, he instantly managed to pull himself together.

"I was ordered by Solomon-sama to take you, Mira-sama, to His Majesty's place with the utmost haste. It is a pressing matter."

His breathing heavy, the guard communicated the orders given to him. Additionally, he wasn't the only person in the outside corridor. That place looked considerably busy as many more people were running around, without even paying attention to each other.

"Okay, I am coming at once."

Thinking about those circumstances—which required someone to actually come over and call her—the young girl realized that they were in an emergency.

"Errr… shouldn't you fix your clothes first, Mira-sama…?"

As she nodded and tried to leave the bedroom, the guard recommended something, shyly. The one-piece dress she was wearing had been greatly stretched during her sleep, exposing the entire area between her collarbones and shoulders.

"Oh, you are right."

After looking at herself and confirming that the man was indeed correct, Mira quickly repaired her attire and then proceeded in the direction of the King's Office, where Solomon awaited her.

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"Send the second and third squads of the Magic Clothed Knights toward the southwest. Split the Sorcery Clothed Experts into two groups and send them to the southeast. I leave their composition in your hands."

It was noisy everywhere in the castle. From the already opened door to the office, Solomon's voice resounded and, following it, a vigorous reply came out. Having received his orders, the officer immediately took off from the room. While looking at that person disappearing in the distance, Mira finally entered the place her friend was in. There, she found a completely tired Solomon, his arms and face lying flat on the office desk.

"Things are looking pretty noisy around here. What happened?"

Upon hearing that voice, the King energetically raised his head.

"Morning… also, we're in huge trouble!"

As soon as he said it, the boy beckoned Mira while hitting the map that was on his table.

"I can somehow guess what you are talking about. So, how huge of a trouble do we have here?"

Solomon, who usually never looked that agitated, now seemed to be in an awful hurry. After seeing that atypical appearance, the girl felt more worried about her friend's countenance than even the restless situation they were currently in.

"I received a report stating that, early this morning, a herd of about three hundred monsters had appeared."

Replying, he used the map and pointed at the area further east of Lunatic Lake. Although that location wasn't really far, it didn't seem like it was a threat that would turn upside down the entire castle, with everyone panicking about it. Having that fact in mind, Mira expressed her doubts.

"Well, seeing this happening three days in a row is quite baffling, but I do not think this is something to be flustered ab——"

Indifferent to what his friend was trying to say, the boy continued to move his finger and stopped at another point in the map.

"Fifteen minutes later, another group of three hundred appeared right here."

"What did you say…?"

Mira had never heard of simultaneous groups of monsters suddenly appearing. Such a situation was also novel to Solomon, who spent thirty years of his life living in that new world; moreover, that scene wasn't over yet. The boy's hand moved once again and indicated two more places.

"About thirty minutes ago, two groups invaded our territory from these two locations, respectively. The first has two hundred monsters while the second is a herd composed of eight hundred."

After revealing those pieces of information, the King, with a sigh, relocated his fingertips on the map.

"And finally, just a while back, about three hundred were spotted at these two points."

While following Solomon's fingertips with her eyes, the girl felt some

anxiety creeping over her and frowned at that abnormality.

"In addition, the report said that within each herd, there was a single individual that seemed atypical. Judging from its characteristics, we're most probably dealing with Lesser Demons."

"Hmm... in other words, every group of monsters is being stirred up by a Lesser Demon, right?"

"Without a doubt, I believe."

The King answered and nodded, taking his hand from the map as he returned to his chair, looking incredibly drained.

"Besides, in the direction that all those six groups of monsters are moving, there is *that* flower garden. I swear, there seems to be something hidden within it."

With his eyes closed in deep thought, Solomon said something that made the girl remember the scene from yesterday, her sight now fixed on the point in the map where the garden was.

"I wonder if they are going to kill each other again."

"Well then, there's this here..."

Using that as an introduction to what he would say next, the boy indicated the place where a group of monsters had appeared, in the southern side of the Kingdom of Arkite, and continued.

"I sent Luminaria to take care of the swarm of eight hundred that invaded us here. Now, I would like to entrust you with the two hundred monsters from the north."

The northern side of the Kingdom. Indicated by Solomon, the location of the monsters' appearance was the closest one to the place Mira had been sent just a day ago: the flower garden.

"Two hundred, huh. Hmm, I do not think there will be any problems, but should I not go to a more worrisome spot?"

Among the groups that appeared, the northern one had the fewest number of monsters and Mira felt it would be relatively fun to take care of that herd. As a result, she jokingly asked that question, but the boy's mouth moved to form an audacious smile as he answered—

"*Naturally, didn't I just decide on the most troublesome one for you?*"

—his appearance now refreshed. Instantly, the air of composure around the girl was undone and the expression on her face changed completely.

"Although there may be less monsters there, they are the ones closer to their probable destination, the flower bed. So you need to reach that place fast, or I believe we won't make it in time. Well, at least the speed problem is already covered, right? You should remember that we have a really quick vehicle."

A fast vehicle that would quickly get her to the group of monsters. Upon hearing those words and recalling the only means of transport that made sense

within that context, Mira's face became even bitter.

"Oh, another thing. The witness report said the Lesser Demon from that herd was holding something akin to a black crystal."

"A black crystal…? Could it possibly be a Demon's Crystal?"

There was a Lesser Demon holding a crystal. She knew the exact meaning of that.

"I think so. That's why I want you to go there."

"I see. Looks like things will not be easy then, huh."

Now agreeing to the fact that she would have preferred to go against the larger herd, the girl accepted the request, albeit with a wry smile.

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After leaving Solomon behind, who had tried to cheer her up by telling that at least all preparations for her trip were already done, Mira arrived at the garage. And just as she had expected, the imposing figure of the Armored Jeep was there, waiting for its next task.

"Mira-sama. I am looking forward to working with you again today."

"Yeah… same here, once again."

Exactly like yesterday, Garrett was standing by the vehicle's side. With a lively smile, he bowed to the girl in front of him.

"Now that everyone is finally here, we'll depart immediately."

Concluding, the man opened the door to the rear seat.

"Oh, then you guys are going with me?"

The moment Mira boarded the jeep, she noticed that there were already two more passengers inside, on standby.

"So the trump card Solomon-sama talked about was Mira-sama? This is quite reassuring."

Directing a pure smile towards Mira was Solomon's loyal servant, the Expert Joachim. As for the other passenger, who remained silent and averted his gaze on the spot while showing a clearly discontent expression, he was also someone the girl knew: the Knight Reynard.

(Same reaction, as always...)

Why were those two individuals going with her? Trying to guess her friend's intentions, the girl sat down near Joachim.

"Okay, we are leeeaving!"

The slightly heavy atmosphere, that had started to form inside the vehicle, was physically dispelled by Garrett's highly spirited voice combined with the abrupt departure of the Armored Jeep.

“He definitely needs to go to a driving school...”

“I heard the impacts would be incredible. But to this extent?”

“Uughh… just what the hell was that? Good grief.”

All together, the three people in the rear seat complained after being flipped over on the sofa.

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During their travel to intercept the herd, Mira and the others discussed how to deal with the monsters.

“I will take care of the frontlines. Joachim, as always, will crush them from behind. And then——”

The Knight, who planned to use the safest and most familiar tactic he knew of, looked at the component of uncertainty that would be added to his strategy this time: Mira.

“Lady Mira will… defeat the Lesser Demon as per Solomon-sama’s orders… but honestly, since I don’t know how capable you are, I am still pretty doubtful. Can we really count on you to do that?”

Reynard’s face was the very definition of seriousness as he devised his strategy, and this time it didn’t bear any resemblance of animosity towards the young girl.

“Indeed, even if we get the worst possible case it will not be any problem.”

“Worst possible case? What’re you talking about? Nah, forget it. At any rate, make sure to kill the demon.”

When Mira replied, the Knight threw a glaring look at her and reminded the girl about her job.

“Of course. I should also say the same to you, do not commit any blunders.”

Looking down on him, she returned the scowl and smiled.

“Come on, both of you. I am sure that there is no need to be worried. Even without seeing it, the fact is that Solomon-sama has recognized Mira-sama’s true strength. And Mira-sama too, please have faith in us. Certainly, Reynard has this meticulous side of him in regards to etiquette—or, rather, he is pretty insistent about it—but that is simply because of his sincere nature as a Knight. Rest assured, he is the sort of man and Knight to carry through his promises when he decides to protect someone. As for me, I would not say that my strength is on the same level as the Elder substitutes, but I am pretty confident in the usage of abilities, so I shouldn’t fall behind.”

Noticing how Mira and Reynard were glaring each other and about to start a heated argument, the person that was right in the middle of that dispute, Joachim, couldn’t endure it and forced them to focus on him. Apparently, the Knight had wanted to say something in response to Mira, but ended up settling

with, "*Naturally*," and directed his eyes to the windshield. Regarding the girl, she had no doubts about the power of someone chosen by Solomon to be his close aide; on the contrary, Mira harboured great respect towards that person's loyalty, someone who would concentrate on devoting himself to her best friend. Of course, she had no intention of putting it into words.

"By no means we should worry about it."

Saying just that, Mira also faced the windshield of the vehicle. There, she noticed a familiar landscape spreading before her. It was the same scenery she had seen the other day, a few moments before they jumped from the paved road to the grasslands. As soon as she realized it, almost by reflex, the girl lowered her posture, directing her face to the sofa.

Immediately after, the Armored Jeep made a splendid dive into that grassy place. Even though the armor of the vehicle made violent sounds, as expected of the pinnacle of Sorcery Engineering, there was simply no damage to its frame and the jeep continued its travel, unfazed by any kind of impact. However, as usual, the same couldn't be said of the ones in the back seat.

"Guuhh… this again?"

"It has plenty enough speed, but at the same time this vehicle requires some countermeasures against the shaking and impacts suffered inside it."

While taking a moment to correct his posture, Reynard groaned with a frown. Next to him, still lying face up on the couch, Joachim gave his analysis of the situation.

"I think there is a problem with the driver too..."

Mira, who used her previous experience with the vehicle to ready herself against the shock, raised her voice as if trying to compete with the severity of the shaking from jeep; she then gazed at the back of Garrett's head, feeling slightly resigned.

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Thanks to the communication device equipped in the Armored Jeep, they kept receiving detailed reports—from the each of the observation forts—about the movements of the herd of monsters. According to the information received, they could infer that the monsters were, indeed, going to the same location as yesterday, the flower garden.

Disregarding its interior, the jeep progressed in excellent condition towards their destination. Ahead of them, it was possible to faintly see the light pillar, so the three continued their strategy meeting while occasionally toppling over on the sofa.

"Okay… then we mustn't defeat them inside the garden, huh?"

"Exactly. As soon as they arrived at that place, they began killing each other. In other words, their aim is to do it in the flower bed. Even the Lesser Demon, who had incited the monsters, released his laugh on the verge of

dying. This is just a guess, but I have the feeling that its objective was to die right there."

Remembering the events from the other day, especially the final moments of the Lesser Demon as it smiled, Mira raised a conjecture. However, she still couldn't grasp the meaning of the monsters needing to die at that particular place.

"They want to die inside the flower garden? Quite the romantic last moments, I must say..."

When he heard the girl's words, Joachim closed both eyes and murmured, a pensive look on his face. At the same time, Reynard groaned, apparently thinking about it too, but it was possible to see on his face the sheer number of questions that had surfaced in his mind.

"That's right… perhaps they might be trying to create a Pure Bog of Undeath."

After the Expert slowly opened his eyes, he talked about his guess.

"A Pure Bog of Undeath? Is that even something that could be created?"

The young girl's voice came out full of surprise as she heard Joachim. That title was something already known to her. Rather, she had a thorough knowledge about it. Frequently found in locations related to the dead—such as battlefields, execution sites, graveyards and the like—it was a place where undead monsters frequently appeared. During her time as Dunbalf, in order to efficiently hunt monsters there, she sometimes had to be on the lookout, since those places were often used by other players.

"Oh no, I didn't mean that we have proof of it being possible to be created. It's just that I have read an essay about that exact matter. And all the conditions for it are present here."

The Expert himself had doubts about it and mentioned that there was no conclusive proof. Following that, he continued and brought up the conditions for the creation of a Pure Bog of Undeath.

First, a region that held some kind of hidden power.

Second, a massive quantity of corpses on that location.

Third, a great number of lives being lost there.

The moment he reached that point, Joachim still seemed able to think of even more conditions, but since they had no description, he brought the explanation to an end.

"According to that thesis, there are many issues regarding the place, and the main one is the transformation powered by the phenomenon of death. For example, let's suppose there is no Pure Bog of Undeath. If the Lesser Demon is trying to cause some kind of change by bringing 'death' to the flower garden, then..."

Saying that, the Expert looked straight ahead, observing the white pillar as they grew closer to it.

"Hmm, that is a very interesting subject. While I cannot even imagine how it would affect the place, seeing that a Lesser Demon is involved, it will not be something good."

Effects brought about by death. The words said by Joachim made the girl think and remember about occult-like terms, such as haunted places and spiritual diseases[13]. In a world where demons, spirits and other similar beings existed, supernatural terms like those could easily be accepted by someone, as strange as it would seem.

Envisioning a flower garden full of fiery souls[14] floating around, Mira gazed absentmindedly at the white pillar.

(I wonder if it wants to start a wildfire or something with those souls…)

Whilst thinking of that apparent joke, she caught sight of a small hill. Yesterday, it was right there that they splendidly flew in the air. And the Armored Jeep was triumphantly accelerating towards that very hill. Seeing how Garrett was at the peak of his condition, Mira quickly assessed the situation and forced her body into a corner of the sofa, bracing herself. When Joachim, who sat next to her, noticed the girl's movements, he also readied himself by sinking his own body deep in the couch.

As the scenery seen from the side window vigorously moved, the only things that could be observed now were the forest and mountain range in the distance, along with the clouds up in the sky; without any interest in them, Reynard's sole focus was on the towering pillar in the front.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar floating sensation assaulted the Knight. At the same time, the scenery he had been previously seeing—a white pillar with the skies in the background—was dyed completely green by the deep vegetation.

"Ughaaaah! Not... again!!"

With that splendid landing, the sound of the impact on the ground was so strong it wouldn't be a surprise to think they had just suffered an accident. Then, amidst the continuous leaps made by the vehicle, Reynard raised his voice as his body somersaulted around. Giving a sidelong glance at what was happening to him, Mira braced herself with both arms and legs. The Expert, who also managed to brace himself in time, felt somewhat relieved that he had escaped the fate of displaying his figure in an unsightly manner.

"Looks like we will arrive before the monsters."

When the shaking in the jeep's frame moderately decreased, the girl gazed at the outskirts of the garden in front of them and expressed her thoughts. Granted, in the entire visible portion of the flower bed, she couldn't find any of the monsters from the herd.

"According to the reports, if the group keeps going straight ahead, they might come out from the forest to our right."

Straining his eyes to confirm the situation, Joachim compared their current position with the herd's latest known location and indicated the possible direction where the monsters might be coming from.

“Did you already expect things would turn out this way? Why.. didn’t you tell me?”

A voice nearly devoid of life and full of resentment could be heard behind them. When the two turned around to look at its source, there they found Reynard’s figure, his body stuck on the backrest of the sofa and looking almost like laundry that had been blown away by the wind.

“Ahh, that is right. My bad. I barely noticed it before it actually happened, so all I could do was brace myself.”

“I had the same problem. The moment I saw what Mira-sama was doing, I quickly readied my posture and immediately after… you know.”

Even though they said that, without a hint of guilt, both Mira and Joachim revealed a faint smile, forcing the Knight to furrow his eyebrows, annoyed. However, in the next instant, the jeep’s wheels ran over something on the ground and caused its entire frame to leap in the air. Without any chances to deal with that unexpected impact, the girl and the Expert rolled together all over the sofa.

“That damn Garrett...”

While she carefully reseated herself, Mira directed her grudge towards the driver and muttered a few words.

“Indeed, this **is** a problem.”

Joachim also complained and, after looking at the innocent expression on Garrett’s face as he controlled the steering wheel, smiled bitterly. On the other hand, seeing how the two other passengers went through the same thing as him, Reynard's smile was of satisfaction.

Chapter 18

As soon as she arrived at her destination, Mira looked around the flower garden, surprised.

"What… what is the meaning of this?"

Observing the ground beneath her feet, she murmured a question. There, the garden was painted in a myriad of colors, a result of the great variety of flowers that had vigorously bloomed in its area.

"Indeed, I wonder what happened..."

Following the girl's reaction, Garrett also sounded astonished by the scenery in the flower bed. Just yesterday, a herd of monsters had gone berserk there, so the outer portion of that circular garden was supposed to be completely devastated, with its terrain trampled down and stained by an immense amount of blood. But now, everywhere they looked, they couldn't find a single vestige of that destruction; there was only the richly colored scenery extending all around the place.

"What's wrong? Is there any problem here?"

Since Reynard wasn't in the garden at the time of that incident, he expressed his doubts while enjoying the view of that splendid flower bed before him, its beautiful flowers in full bloom.

"Yes, and rather than a problem, there is something inexplicable here. The entire group of monsters that had appeared yesterday killed each other right here, in this garden. At that time, the state of this place could only be considered as a so-called *battlefield*, taking into account that its grounds ended ravaged and soaked in the blood of those monsters. Strangely, only the outer portions of the flower garden were in that condition, but——"

While he was explaining what had happened, the military man stopped his words for a moment, bringing back his sight towards the garden.

"As you can see, there isn't even a single trace of blood here, let alone the huge devastation from the other day."

In the area within their view, evoking the image of pure and innocent maidens, lovely flowers were swayed by the wind, their faint rustling sounding like whispers in the air. There was simply no way to imagine that, just yesterday, hundreds of monsters had slaughtered each other in that peaceful place.

"Was that so…?"

"Certainly, this is a mystery."

Once more, Reynard and Joachim looked around the flower bed and muttered a few words. As if lured by it, Mira also raised her face and investigated, with great attention, the surrounding region. Then, the moment she reconfirmed that there wasn't a single speck of taint on the garden, her gaze stopped at something that instantly brought a sense of uneasiness to her:

it was the symbol of that place, the sky-high white pillar. Different from its upper part, that was pure white, the lower portion had been dyed black, looking almost like a sheet of paper that had been soaked in black ink.

Although the girl's attention was drawn to that specific part, since she had not verified in detail that pillar yesterday, her memories about it were, one way or another, unclear. To the point that, if anyone were to tell her that the pillar had always been like that, she would be convinced on the spot. And it was this very fact that fueled her unease.

"Mira-sama, is there anything wrong?"

Noticing how Mira had her eyebrows furrowed while continuously staring at a single, fixed point, the driver called out to her; then, a moment later, with her concentration broken by that voice, she removed her gaze from the white construction.

"Maybe it is just my imagination, but I have the feeling that the pillar over there turned a little bit darker..."

"The pillar…?"

It was almost like she had mumbled it to herself, but when Garrett heard those words, he squinted towards the center of the flower garden, far away from their current position, and tried to check it.

"Now that you mention it, I'm also getting the same impression… still, seeing that the garden looked so disgusting, with everything dyed in blood, it left a very strong impression on me, so my memories about the pillar aren't that clear."

"Right? I cannot remember it well too. Did it change overnight? Or did it not? Which one is the right answer? I do not know."

By now, the girl didn't have the motivation to remember it anymore, and just mentioned what she felt while looking up at the incredibly high pillar.

"Well then, we just confirmed that, so far, no monsters have reached this place. I wonder where the herd is at this exact moment..."

Considering that Reynard wasn't interested in the garden itself, he cautiously watched the surrounding forest, searching for the group of monsters. However, there were no signs of it anywhere; he could only see the leaves in the trees, gently swaying every time the wind blew on them.

"According to the report we received just now, I believe they might be already approaching this location."

Garrett looked in the probable direction that the monsters would be coming from. As stated by the transmission they had received a few minutes ago, the herd was around five kilometers away to the north-north-east of the flower garden and still advanced towards it.

"Okay, let me try a little search there. It should be that way, right?"

As Joachim observed the direction of the driver's gaze and asked a question, it seemed like he had some kind of method to investigate that place.

"Yes, taking the report into account, if they continue to move straight ahead, the monsters should emerge from the interior of the woods over there."

The surroundings of the flower bed were covered in grass, at the beginning, and ended in a thinly scattered forest. While pointing towards that exact location, Garrett answered and the Expert moved to verify it. He brought his left hand to his ear and, with the right arm stretched, directed that limb to the woods that had been previously indicated.

(Is that… Abstractionism?)

Noticing the faint light that covered both of Joachim's hands, she began observing the situation with great interest. As he continued to use his ability, no one dared to speak a single word for an entire minute, the time it took for the Expert to drop his shoulders and relax his posture, taking a breather.

"Did you find anything?"

After a short pause, Reynard finally asked his companion while Mira and Garrett also eagerly awaited the answer.

"There is still some reasonable distance between us, but I managed to confirm the footsteps of a group approaching this place. Without a doubt, it seems I found the herd of monsters."

"Alright. If that's the case, it will be a good plan to attack them at the grasslands past the forest. I believe there's no need to actually wait for them right here, their very goal."

Joachim answered while staring intently at the interior of the forest, causing the Knight to propose a course of action as he focused his sight on the same spot. If the four of them were to wait in the garden, no matter which route the herd would take, it would eventually appear before them. But now, with the help of the Expert's skill, they had the confirmation of the monsters' whereabouts; as a result, there was no need to be concerned anymore about a certain hypothetical situation, where they never find the herd in the woods and let the monsters finally reach their objective. Then, just as Reynard had said, there was no meaning in waiting at the garden.

"Indeed. Let's make haste!"

As soon as he said that, Garrett began running towards the Armored Jeep, feeling that it was his turn to shine, once again. With a disheartened expression, the other three followed behind, their pace heavy and dragging.

◆◆◆

"By the way, some time ago, you used an ability to find out the whereabouts of the group of monsters. What kind of skill was that?"

Regaining her composure after the jeep was forced to travel with caution inside the forest, Mira took the opportunity to immediately ask Joachim about something that had made her curious.

"Used an ability some time ago… oh, the Sharp Hearing skill, right?"

He answered amidst all the shaking they were experiencing in the vehicle. Even though the driver was gently doing his job this time, the Armored Jeep still swung from side to side, more than ever before.

"Oho, so it is called 'Sharp Hearing,' huh? Then, its classification should be under Abstractionism, right?"

"Indeed, you could say that. But it would be more appropriate to classify it as Secret Abstractionism."

"Secret Abstractionism…?"

After hearing a completely unfamiliar term, the girl approached Joachim with her eyes shining and, almost glued to him, asked another question.

"Come to think of it, you have been training with Dunbalf-sama in a remote place until a few days ago, so I heard that Mira-sama must be unacquainted with the most recent situation regarding the abilities."

"Hmm, well… it is something like that. Then…?"

She simply decided to roughly keep what Joachim had said about her as the truth. Considering the long thirty years that she was gone, it was a good excuse that Mira and Solomon had planned together, in order to cover for her current lack of knowledge about the ways of the world.

"Although there are various conditions to use Abstractionism skills, some of them have different, special requirements. And those are the ones categorized under the Secret Abstractionism."

"Special requirements? What kind of requirements are we talking about?"

Falling onto the sofa face-first after a massive jolt from the armored vehicle, the girl immediately got up and urged Joachim to continue, her expression full of glee. As a fellow Expert, the man could easily understand Mira's reaction to what he had been saying.

"To tell you the truth, we have yet to elucidate the exact conditions needed to use this kind of Abstractionism. However, it is said that there could be a connection between certain factors, such as the possession or not of a divine blessing of spirits and the type and number of monsters defeated. Anyway, even for the Sharp Hearing ability, the only confirmation we have is that the divine blessing of wind spirits is related to its acquisition."

While securing himself against the swaying with both hands, Joachim explained about the requirements. Then, he finally concluded, saying that the process of learning Secret Abstractionism techniques was extremely difficult to reproduce, adding—with a slightly triumphant look on his face—that within the continent, only a handful users of Sharp Hearing existed.

"Could I not be able to learn it…?"

As a result, she understood that the acquisition of Secret Abstractionism skills wasn't a feat she could somehow achieve after just listening to its explanation. So it was a relatively sulky Mira that rolled over when the vehicle made a violent swing and, at the same time, complained in a murmur, "*I will*

definitely send him to a driving school."

◆◆◆

In just a few minutes, the Armored Jeep ran through the forest to the north of the flower garden and arrived at a flat grasslands area. Immediately, in a place about one kilometer ahead of them, they detected the herd, a black squirming mass of monsters.

"Okay, just as we have guessed. We'll assault them here, so slowly stop the vehicle."

"The field of view seems fine and there aren't any obstacles that could obstruct the usage of skills. The conditions are pretty favorable to us. Now please slow down, then stop the jeep."

"Indeed. And with our view unimpeded, they will not be able to run away. Take your time while stopping."

As the three passengers bent their bodies and gazed at what was beyond the windshield, each of them also placed a hand on Garrett's left shoulder, head and right shoulder, emphasizing the request portion of their speech.

"Roger that!"

Having three people continuously reminding him, the driver did as told and gently stepped on the brakes, finally bringing the Armored Jeep to a stop. The moment they confirmed it had actually happened, the three caught their collective breath, relieved, and stepped on the grasslands.

"Now then, may the fortunes of war smile upon you. Just as we have planned, I will move to the backup point, so please send a signal if you need my help."

After verifying if the doors were closed, Garrett said what he was going to do, pointing towards the top of a hill, to the right of the advancing group of monsters.

"Yeah, got it. Well, I don't think we'll have any problems against this number of enemies."

"Don't get careless, Reynard."

"Hmpf, I know what I'm talking about."

Observing the foes that were heading straight towards them, the Knight mentioned how easy their job would be, earning in the process a warning from the prudent Joachim. Nonetheless, there were no signs of worry at all behind those words; rather, it seemed like the Expert had said that warning to himself.

Slowly and without standing out, the Armored Jeep began climbing the hill to their right in order to reach the backup point. While gazing at the back of the vehicle with cold eyes, Mira grumbled, "*Now he knows how to drive safely*," and both Joachim and Reynard simply nodded in agreement.

"Okay, have you memorized our strategy?"

Changing his focus, the Knight called out to the young girl.

"Of course."

Also returning her attention to the herd, Mira answered while rubbing her chin with a finger, a signature pose that had been mastered by her. If it were during her time as Dunbalf, that appearance would look perfectly appropriate, but now, with the figure of a little girl, she didn't look reliable at all.

"Hmm, fine then… but I heard that a Lesser Demon is capable of using some unusual kinds of summons. Will you still be okay with it?"

"Remember what I told you before? Even if we get the worst case, I will not have any problems."

"Come to think of it, you really said that. Well, if anything happens, I'll provide my support."

As soon as he mentioned it, the Knight put on a show of readying the shield that was in his hand. Although it seemed like he would be the kind of person to turn against her, Reynard was a righteous Knight, someone who would never let his personal feelings interfere with his work.

"Nothing will happen, so you can just attract the herd without any worries."

Besides the glimpse of his nature that the girl had caught through their conversation, there was a main reason for why she recognized that man as a true Knight. Simply put, it was the fact that Solomon had chosen him as his loyal retainer.

"Now then, I leave the tanking job to you."

Reynard snorted in amusement at her remark and began walking towards the monsters, an air of composure around him. A few moments later, Joachim followed after him. With that, Mira also decided to move, turning to the left and going further away from the two in order to reach the flank of the herd.

The strategy they had decided to use began with Reynard and Joachim's role. Just the two of them would go against the majority of the herd and, for that to work, they would make themselves stand out by facing the monsters head-on.

In the distance, like dark-colored ripples on the grasslands, the group of enemies continued their rush, gradually revealing its whole aspect in detail. First, dashing as the herd's vanguard, were four-legged monsters, the Dirty Hounds. Following them and assembled in platoons were the Arch Goblins, a subspecies of the Goblin. Finally, making itself secure at the heart of those platoons, was the Lesser Demon, as spotted by Mira.

(No surprise here, it is heavily guarded.)

Even though Mira's role in the strategy was to take care of the Lesser Demon, it also included another related duty. In order to accomplish it, she separated from the other two and, while concealing herself to not attract any attention, advanced downwind.

Eventually, Reynard's group squared off against the monsters. At that moment, in the middle of the grass-covered plain, the distance between them seemed to be about twenty meters. And every time the wind blew through, as far as the eye could see, ripples appeared on the green vegetation in quick succession. The ones that currently perturbed those waves were the nearly two hundred monsters gathered there, along with a person whose mere threatening aura—directed at his enemies—disturbed the surrounding atmosphere: the Knight Reynard.

When that man drew his sword, he moved forward to block the advancing foes, causing them to interrupt their movements. It was a group of two hundred against only two individuals, but following their instincts, the monsters had stopped their legs. The Dirty Hounds let out a low growl as they glared at the two men, in an intimidation attempt. However, disregarding that display of hostility, the Knight continued his march, step by step.

Before long, in the center of the herd, the Lesser Demon released his strident voice. Immediately, as if receiving their orders, ten-odd hounds from the vanguard cried out in a mad howl while simultaneously rushing towards Reynard. Without losing a second to act, when the Knight took a big step forward and planted his foot there, the air at that spot began to tremble, propagating that same effect to the surroundings. After seeing that overwhelming vigor, even Mira thought it was a considerable display of skill and experience.

And yet, the Dirty Hounds did not stop. With their instincts dampened, the monsters looked like puppets as they lunged at the enemy in front of them. A moment later, those hounds were engulfed by the quivering atmosphere and, in an instant, when Reynard took another daunting step, he screamed out fiercely while flashing his sword.

Without touching anything at all, the Knight's weapon made a full swing, suddenly stopping with its tip pointed towards the sky. At the same time, all sounds ceased; even the wind seemed to become quiet as the entire place was engulfed in silence. Then, abruptly, the vegetation was torn to shreds, its small pieces scattering in the air. Following that, the Dirty Hounds that had attacked Reynard were instantaneously bisected, their split open bodies simply and quietly falling down as the blood oozed out of them, finally painting the grasslands in a dark red tone.

(Superb.)

Mira, who had been watching the situation from afar, said a word of admiration in her mind and returned her attention to the heart of the enemy group. The Lesser Demon was flailing both of its hands overhead while shouting wildly, glaring at Reynard with vengeful eyes. As an immediate response, the entire herd of monsters concentrated its gaze in a single point. Recognizing that man as a true threat, they had decided to use all their strength to eliminate him.

On the demon's orders, the group began changing its formation and, without doing anything, both Reynard and Joachim patiently waited for them to finish that action. With their caution entirely directed at those two individuals,

the monsters completed their battle formation by perfectly surrounding the Knight and the Expert, having absolutely no intention of letting those two run away from them.

"This is within our expectations. It seems our strategy will be able to continue as planned."

After glancing at the area around them, Joachim whispered to Reynard.

"Let's continue, then."

As if making a display of it, the Knight raised his sword high, receiving in return an intimidating war cry from his enemies, a roar that seemingly indicated the two were going to be devoured whole. Then, a loud uproar started all around the grasslands, enough to drown out a certain sound of footsteps that rapidly approached the herd. Because of the sweet scent of a young girl that came wafting directly behind it, the demon managed to pick out that specific noise within the cacophony of sounds in the area.

Since the monsters had changed their battle formation to surround Joachim and Reynard, those two were now at the very center of the group. Then, in order to evaluate the flow of battle with ease, the Lesser Demon had taken took position in a place that was farthest away from its enemies. When that same demon turned around to look behind it, Mira was standing right there. She had been waiting for the moment when the Lesser Demon would be left completely alone.

(A black crystal… yeah, it is the Demon's Crystal. Just as expected, that one is of a summoner kind.)

In the exact instant it noticed the two Dark Knights standing by the girl's side, the demon panicked and raised toward the heavens the Demon's Crystal he had been holding.

"Well then, I wonder what it will pull out from its hat. Will it be a lion? Or a dragon[15]?"

The actions done by the Lesser Demon were a rite required to perform a summon. Nonetheless, differently from the summoning techniques used by Mira, the one conducted by a Demon's Crystal would call out to a demon beast, completely at random. If she were lucky, it would only result in another Dirty Hound being added to the herd, but it was a kind of dangerous summoning spell that would, in the worst case, bring out a large demonic beast.

However, without even trying to interfere with the summoning process, the girl simply observed the magic circle that had appeared and expanded in the sky. When fighting against an enemy summoner, defeating it before it performed the summon would be much easier to accomplish—but that theory didn't apply when going against the cunning Lesser Demon.

Immediately before its death, that demon would release from its body a black mist, entirely shaped by malice. Although it was something that would, after several seconds, completely disperse in the air as the Lesser Demon's last and vain struggle, if an object or body containing some kind of special magical power were nearby, the mist would place a curse on it. Then, whether

it was in the middle of a summoning or not, a cursed Demon's Crystal would always bring forth a high-level beast. Obviously, it was still possible for a clean crystal to summon a high-level monster, and it was precisely because Solomon considered those possibilities that he chose to send Mira to that place.

Mira's duty in their plan of action, other than taking care of the Lesser Demon, also included the defeat of the summoned demon beast. She did not feel the slightest hint of apprehension over what kind of enemy would come out and simply waited for it. Meanwhile, when the crystal began emitting an ominous radiance, the moment finally arrived. The magic circle that had been floating in the sky suddenly expanded and, a second later, with the appearance of old trees, two thick and warped legs hit the ground, the massive force of their impact causing a tremor around them.

"Humpf, worst case it is."

While gazing at that scene, Mira muttered those words with a sigh. No matter how she looked at it, those familiar legs protruding from the circle belonged to a high-class demonic beast. As the summoning continued, the next thing that appeared was a tail, sliding around as it extended itself and struck the ground with a heavy, dull sound. That limb was even thicker than the legs and had scales covering its entire surface, just like a dragon's tail.

Then, at long last, the whole body of the beast was revealed. With a large build that was enough to allow it the privilege of calmly overlooking all the trees in the forest, the monster turned its neck around, scanning the surroundings. Subsequently, since the summoning process was over, the magic circle vanished; at that moment, looking as if it was convinced of its own victory, the Lesser Demon released its extremely annoying laugh.

But right after that, a sky-tearing roar engulfed the entire place, easily overpowering that laughing voice and any other sounds in the area. Grimacing from the sheer volume of that bellow, Reynard and Joachim shifted their attention to the culprit. Standing at the outer part of the wriggling herd of monsters was the figure of a beast, its upper body similar to a rooster's and the lower body resembling that of a lizard. Those caught by its eyes would never again see the break of dawn, forced to gaze upon a stone-imbued dream for all of eternity. "Cockatrice" was the name of that demon beast, a full-fledged high-level monster, holder of several troublesome abilities.

"That one is simply too dangerous! We need to back her up immediately, Joachim!"

Having enough knowledge about the Cockatrice, unsurprisingly, the Knight felt that Mira was in a disadvantageous position and tried to go for her aid. However, as the monsters surrounded both of them, not only were they unable to escape the encirclement, but the two weren't allowed to even leave their current position.

"Damn it! Get out of my way, you pieces of shit!"

Without hiding his irritation, Reynard was already clicking his tongue when the Expert clasped his shoulder.

"Please calm down. And then watch well what is happening. Even though

Mira-sama is standing in front of that demonic beast, she isn't displaying any signs of discomposure. Try to remember her expression when Mira-sama said that, even if she gets the worst case, it would still be within her expectations."

Following Joachim's words, the Knight recalled the lovely and jovial smile she had, an air of composure around her. Then, as if on cue, differently from the boastful roar from before, a shriek full of pain swept over the grass-covered plain. After seeing and hearing that scene, Reynard could perfectly feel his head suddenly cooling down.

"Yeah, that's right. I guess she won't need our help there."

His voice now calm, he murmured in agreement before cutting up the Dirty Hounds that swooped to attack, subsequently returning his sight from the Cockatrice to the monsters in front of him.

The scream heard by the Knight came from none other than the demonic beast itself. After being successfully summoned and landing on the ground, in a probable display of might, it released a loud cry while spreading its huge wings, closely following those actions by shaking and loosening its own body. Then, with slow movements, the monster gazed at the girl before its eyes; originally, the Cockatrice's eyes would be capable of even stopping a strong warrior on their tracks, stunning them with the sense of intimidation coming out of those organs. In the next moment, however, all of a sudden, the beast lost half of those threatening weapons.

Blood started flowing abundantly from one side of the Cockatrice's face before it screeched in pain, so when Reynard witnessed that instant, he understood how futile were his worries. Among the two Dark Knights standing by her side, the one to the girl's left had its sword covered in fresh blood, an endless flow of red droplets trickling down that weapon.

Without even waiting a few seconds after the completion of the summon, the Dark Knight had slashed one of the monster's eyes. Hidden within those organs was a magical power endowed with the special ability of Petrification; and yet, that power could only be activated if both eyes were used together. Having fought against that monster on countless occasions, Mira knew about that fact and immediately took proper action to block that special ability. However, after losing its strongest technique, the Cockatrice still filled itself with the will to fight, releasing a roar while showing an expression full of anger.

On the other hand, the Lesser Demon was different. Evidently, it had been shaken when the beast was wounded, so the demon glared with frightened eyes at the Dark Knights lined up in front of it.

Nevertheless, starting now, it was going to be a full-blown fight between enemies. When the girl deployed her summons to the forward area, the Cockatrice responded by lowering its stance, preparing itself for the combat. And then, as the two parties were about to crash against each other, the Lesser Demon screamed. In the next instant, without a clear reason, the monster's once enraged eye—that had been glaring at its enemy during that time—suddenly lost its vividness, growing dull in color. Afterwards, the demon started running and, just like that, jumped on top of the Cockatrice.

“What… the… hell…?”

Leaping high in the sky and skipping over both foes and allies alike, the beast broke out in a run towards the exact direction of the flower garden. Mira, who had been eager for a direct fight, was overcome with surprise, watching the receding figure of the Cockatrice with a dumbfounded expression. Every time it jumped in the air, the demonic beast would start flapping its wings to slow down its falling speed. Looking at that figure, rather than actually flying, the Cockatrice was simply doing long jumps while parachuting itself.

“HEEY!! STOP RIGHT THEEERE!!”

Being dazed by that somewhat comical appearance, Mira finally came to her senses and began, with all her might, chasing after the demonic beast that was thrusting itself into the woods. With a bitter smile on their faces, Reynard and Joachim observed the running girl as she disappeared in the forest.

Chapter 19

A flower garden with a white, soaring pillar right at its center. That place was currently serving as the background for the confrontation between Mira and the demonic beast Cockatrice, with the latter being accompanied by its summoner, the Lesser Demon.

"You crafty little piece of..."

Just when she had thought they were about to fight, both of her enemies simply ran away, forcing her to rush after the two. Then, a few moments later, with the figure of the garden in the background, the girl finally managed to catch up with them; that being said, the Cockatrice wasn't a monster that could easily be caught simply by running. She only succeeded in doing so mainly because of her equipment and the terrain. There were many articles worn by Mira that held within them special effects and, of course, the ability to amplify her running power was one of those. Additionally, she was fortunate enough that because of its large build, the demon beast had a hard time running through the forest, so it had simply resorted to jumping.

Now, after regaining the considerable distance that had been put between her and the monster, the girl summoned an extra three Black Knights and had them surround the Cockatrice. As such, including the two standing in wait by her side, there was a total of five conjured knights in that place. Apparently vexed, the Lesser Demon kept glaring at their ghastly figures, an overwhelming sense of intimidation being emitted by them even as they stood there, motionless.

If it was against a Dark Knight, the demonic beast had the confidence that it could shake free from its opponent. And without a doubt, the fact was that the knight's pace would never reach that of the Cockatrice. However, the number of Dark Knights there had further increased and, consequently, the Lesser Demon now felt regret over its decision to merely judge Mira by her appearance.

Yet, it did not give up.

Shouting with a bawling voice, the Lesser Demon pointed at the young girl. Immediately, with its eye seething in madness, the Cockatrice released a strange sound and broke into a run towards Mira. While advancing, every time its feet hit the ground the earth would be gouged out, throwing in the air the thick vegetation that was once there. Naturally, the beast possessed an enormous mass that was directly proportional to its large body, and just that monster's movements could be enough to blow away most things in the middle of its path.

In spite of that, the demonic beast's claws and beak never reached Mira. The Cockatrice's massive body began to lurch to one side as its right leg, that was covered in strong scales, suffered a deep wound—the Dark Knights that were surrounding the monster had only aimed and slashed against that leg.

(When it has something to protect, it will not even hesitate to throw itself in

a suicide attack...)

Promptly, the girl had made her decision and gave an order to her summoned units. Since she didn't know how tough the beast's leg could be, she settled with an all-out attack against it and managed to successfully wound the Cockatrice, inhibiting any further assaults from that monster as its means of running was damaged. As a result, without sufficient support for its large build, the Cockatrice retreated while dragging its right foot.

But then, it happened. In a corner of her field of view, from a place that would be difficult to notice had Mira not been paying attention, the Lesser Demon rushed out towards the flower field.

(Hm? Did it use the Cockatrice as a decoy?)

While using the beast's massive body to conceal itself, the demon had moved to a distant location. Then, before the girl became aware of that, the Lesser Demon came up with an urgent plan to carry out its precious objective. It just needed a few meters to reach its goal, so while seemingly assured of that victory, the demon let out its usual, annoying laugh and flaunted a disgusting expression, full of joy, in the direction of Mira.

The girl, however, simply stood still and only turned her head to look at her enemy—although there wasn't even a need for that. She had already predicted that the Lesser Demon's target was the garden. What it actually intended to do there was still a question to be answered, but the girl was certain that nothing good would come of that. As a result, it could be said that as long as the Lesser Demon never reached the flower bed, it would be fine.

A gust of wind ran through the grasslands. And within that thundering, furious gale was rage itself, clad in jet-black. Suddenly, the laughter that could be heard all around stopped and was replaced, in the next moment, by a shriek full of hatred that covered the entire area. Nonetheless, that same sound also lasted for a single instant before it quickly disappeared.

Lying on the ground, right at the destination of the wind that had been previously blown, were the remains of the Lesser Demon, its body swallowed up and bisected by a cruel storm of black. Upon closer examination, while the demon's hollow pupils looked up at the sky, it was possible to see a distorted expression on its dead face, almost as if dread itself had been smeared all over it. Finally, standing right next to the body was a Dark Knight, its sword wet with blood.

That individual was one of the two summons that were by Mira's side. After arriving at her current location, the girl had ordered the knight to eliminate any enemies that approached the flower field, so it quickly executed its mission. Therefore, she had no need to move even a single step from that place.

As if nothing had happened, the knight calmly distanced itself from the corpse and walked towards its master. Then, from behind, a black mist rose into the air: it was the substance made of pure malice from the Lesser Demon's dead body.

"Wait… what is happening there?"

Since there was nothing nearby that could be cursed, the mist was supposed to disperse and disappear with the wind. But instead, while apparently displaying some kind of will, the smog began flying straight ahead. As something that she had never seen or heard about, the girl vigilantly observed the floating movements of the grudge-like substance, completely leaving the problem of dealing with the Cockatrice to her other three Dark Knights. Slowly but surely, the black mist drew close to its supposed foe, the summoned knight, and merely passed by it, continuing to move away from Mira.

(What kind of phenomenon is that? It is as if the substance is actually wandering around, seeking a target to curse...)

Rubbing her chin with a finger, the girl squinted, using her eyes to follow the smog.

Without the slightest breeze going through the grass-covered plain, the Dark Knight's footsteps could be perfectly heard even at a long distance. Then, just like the laughter of the now dead Lesser Demon, those sounds suddenly stopped as the knight returned to the girl's side. Immediately after, coming from the location where the substance of malice had arrived at, a groan-like breathing faintly reached Mira's ears.

"So… does it really intend to curse *that*?"

When the wobbling mist finally reached its planned destination, what had been lying in wait was the Cockatrice, its figure standing right there in silence even though the monster's eye still seethed with rage. If it tried to move just an inch, the Dark Knights would cut it down; the Cockatrice clearly understood that, despite having its body covered in wounds. As a result, while boiling with an agonizing and insane fury, the beast still managed to control the urge to go on a slaughter and quietly obeyed the last orders of its master, the Lesser Demon.

Abruptly, after the smog of hatred reached the monster's side, that black substance swelled up and, almost like it was being sucked up, gained speed to coil around the demon beast's tattered body, going inside it through its wounds, eyes and mouth.

In the end, the Cockatrice's transformation was dramatic.

As the black fog grew thinner, the monster's physique distorted into a larger form, to the point that it seemed dangerously close to rupturing and exploding like a bomb. Then, the beast groaned in an extremely sad and pitiful roar. Every single spot on its body that had been wounded was closed up by the swelled up flesh, and the single eye that still harbored an intense desire to kill became bloodshot, revealing an even stronger color of madness.

Following the transformation, at long last the mist dispersed completely, signaling the conclusion of the curse. That substance of malice was supposed to only curse objects with power stored inside of them, so when it targeted—of all things—a high-class demonic beast, the smog managed to do something that, until that very moment, had been considered unthinkable to happen.

(To think this situation would occur… is it also because of the game turning

into reality?)

Strengthening her wariness, Mira examined the appearance of the Cockatrice after it became two—no, three times as large than before. Whether the beast had lost the focus from its eye or was still adapting to its new body, it looked around blankly and casually spread its wings, shivering. Over and over, the Cockatrice repeated those actions.

(Well, at any rate, looks like it did not turn into something troublesome.)

Along with a bitter smile, the girl sighed and gazed at the monster's new form that, now, looked considerably different from its previous figure. Then, at the same time, the three Dark Knights assaulted the Cockatrice in a jet-black storm.

"Oh… apparently its toughness has increased."

Not long ago, the knights' attacks would tear the demon beast's flesh, spraying blood all over the place, but now it was completely different. Although their blades still damaged the monster's legs, wings and torso, the wounds never reached further than its skin. In addition, with every passing second, those injuries would get instantly healed, leaving behind just slight scars.

And yet, the Dark Knights did not stop; on the contrary, their swords grew faster and began drawing even sharper trajectories. As they continued to attack, when one of their strikes finally managed to gouge the beast's flesh, it also brought the Cockatrice back to its senses; until now, it had been absentmindedly observing the surroundings.

With a glare, the moment it perceived the figures of its three foes, the monster's crimson, bloodshot eye opened wide. Immediately, that same eye became dyed by hatred and, as the Cockatrice reached its boiling point, it strongly flapped its wings, apparently trying to ward off the knights that persistently continued their attacks. As soon as it did that, a squall broke out and mowed down the surrounding area.

Trees began to creak, their leaves scattering and disappearing in the air while the grasslands swayed violently, like a sea in the middle of a storm. It wouldn't even be an exaggeration to consider that wind as a shock wave, seeing that Mira's small body was sent floating away from the ground. Then, the moment the storm calmed down, a large number of splinters that had been blown away began slowly falling all around the place.

"Managing to do this much with just a flap of its wings… I guess it became considerably stronger."

As though stepping in the air, the girl kicked it twice—then three times—to decelerate and land on the ground without a problem. Her knights, that had also been blown away, quickly regained their postures and surrounded the beast from three sides. While focusing on the Dark Knight in front of it, the Cockatrice's accumulated rage was ignited when it noticed that enemy calmly preparing to attack with the black sword. Then, from the mouth that seemed to completely split open, erupted an explosive, sky-shattering roar. Be it the heavens or the earth, the very space itself trembled with the thunderous sound that was released. It was so loud, the intense vibrations on Mira's eardrums

almost numbed them, causing the girl to grimace and take half a step back, covering both ears with the cuffs of her robe.

"Good grief, what a noisy fellow..."

Without even reaching her own ears, Mira's annoyed mutter was immediately drowned out by a sequence of metallic sounds. In the middle of the grasslands, the roar had signaled the beginning of the battle between the Dark Knights and the Cockatrice. Screaming in a frenzy, the monster made use of its deadly body and charged against its enemies. While not showing the slightest hint of being perturbed by the oncoming attack, the girl's summoned units received it, moving their swords. The Cockatrice's fierce strike held an incredible amount of destructive power, piercing the ground and slicing off the air. In addition, after taking a form ready for battle, the beast's skin became even harder and the knights could no longer cut through it as easily as before.

However, those were the only things that had impressed Mira. Of course, anyone would be amazed after seeing the power of that blow; it was strong to the point that even herself wouldn't come out unscathed after receiving such an attack. Yet, it was just that, nothing else. Originally, the Cockatrice would make use of its dangerous special power and, together with its nimble body, deliver a powerful combo attack. So the strike the beast just performed, by swinging its entire frame with all its might, appeared pathetic when compared with the combined attack. It was akin to fastening a lump of iron to the pointy end of a great spear, completely destroying its specialty.

If one were to talk about the sole advantage the monster currently held, it would be the Cockatrice's tough body that was able to withstand the Dark Knight's blades. But even then, it still gradually received damage, and it was only a matter of time until that large figure would fall down, defeated.

Despite that, Mira had been observing the battle with a displeased look on her face. It was indeed only a matter of time for it to end, but at that rate it looked like the fight would conclude after sunset. Although she could easily solve that problem by just increasing the number of Dark Knights, Mira had a stronger desire to understand the current state of the new reality she was in. As a result, she had been wanting to confirm the behavior and degree of coordination between her summoned units. If the girl tried to add more knights to the battle, she wouldn't be able to give her full attention to every single one of them and would, eventually, lose details from their fight.

(Anyway, I still have time even if I do not do it right now. It should be fine to try things out without rushing, no?)

Since Mira had just barely started living in that new world, there was no need for her to act rashly. Then, rather than experiment with that situation, she decided to be patient and analyze the world slowly, one thing at a time.

"Hmm? What is that?"

When Mira tried to promptly settle the fight by summoning more Dark Knights, she noticed, from the corner of her eye, a certain crystal that shone ominously. Lying at the edge of the flower garden, that object fell on the ground after its owner, the Lesser Demon, had been cruelly bisected by her

knight—it was still possible to see the corpse right by the crystal's side. Moved by curiosity, the girl approached the item and picked it up. The crystal, that was painted in a dull, black color and emitted some kind of pulsating light, was, without a doubt, the Demon's Crystal.

The Demon's Crystal was a special item that only Lesser Demons of the Summoning kind held. Nevertheless, upon the demon's death, it would always disappear along with the corpse, so the players considered that impossible-to-obtain item as mere graphics in the game.

"Oho… ohohoho. Now that is how you should grab my attention."

While observing the item in her hand, Mira revealed a wild smirk. Now that the game world was real, instead of simply disappearing, beings like monsters would leave behind a corpse when defeated and, eventually, return to the nature after decomposing. As such, that natural cycle ended up granting her an unexpected favor: the possibility to obtain a Demon's Crystal, the unique crystal used by Lesser Demons to perform summonings. Considering Mira held an extraordinary interest in summoning techniques, since the very start she had been greatly fascinated by the summoning catalyst employed by the demon.

As the girl analyzed the crystal, the sound of something violently colliding with an object reached her ears. Almost instantly, a body clad in black passed by her side—the Cockatrice had sent a Dark Knight flying away. While being subjected by the momentum of the beast's strike, the knight bored onto the garden behind Mira and finally stopped after the upper half of its body had been buried into the ground. However, in the next moment, with a conduct that looked undoubtedly impossible for a human to perform, the black knight rose up and rushed out like a bullet.

(It looks exactly like an attributed crystal… but the tinge is different from one related to the Darkness attribute. It is not supposed to shine in such a disgusting way.)

In spite of that, Mira had been so engrossed with the item that the ongoing battle didn't even enter her mind. It was the first time she had ever held a Demon's Crystal and when she looked at it, Mira was immediately reminded of an attributed crystal. That kind of item could be used by a variety of different fields and, specifically, was a well-known, all-purpose material in the area of summoning.

Summoning Experts possessed a certain ability called "Attribute Shift". It allowed them to take an object with pure attribute effects and use it as a catalyst, enhancing their Armor Spirit with the same attribute. As a result, when summoned with the help of an Attribute Shift, most of the Armor Spirit's strength would have the characteristic of the effect contained within the used catalyst.

"Trying it out might be fun."

Although it emitted an unfamiliar color, that dark crystal had traits that greatly resembled those of an attributed crystal. Then, as soon as she decided to try an attribute shifted summon with the item, Mira immediately put those

thoughts into action.

In the grasslands, the sounds of the Dark Knight's swords and the Cockatrice's roar continued to ring out, incessantly. The area where that fierce battle raged was supposed to be covered in green, but now it was completely bare of any vegetation, with clouds of dust rising and dancing at every moment the fighters clashed. While looking at the space in front of the battle, the girl held the Demon's Crystal over her head.

【Summoning：Attribute Shifted Dark Knight】

Applying the same feeling she had whenever she wanted to summon a Dark Knight, Mira added just a little change to the process and released the power contained within the crystal. Then, the magic circle that had appeared in front of her began to absorb the energy gushing out of the Demon's Crystal, growing twice, thrice as large as its initial state.

"How should I put it… this is really weeeeeird."

In a fraction of a second, the magic circle was dyed in a poisonous-looking black and began squirming around, looking as if it were the entrails of some creature. Having felt signs of something unusual happening, the young girl hurriedly jumped away from that place. Immediately after, just like a clogged blood vessel, the circle didn't resist the sudden swelling and exploded, ejecting and spraying its blood—the magical power—in all directions.

At first, the girl wondered if the summoning had failed after seeing such a grand spectacle before her eyes. However, when the slimy vestiges of magic power stopped raining down, something massive was filling up that previously empty spot. It occupied so much space one would think that all the trees surrounding the place had been gathered at that exact location.

Standing there, majestically, was a being that wore an armor just like a knight and had a tough physique, similar to a wild beast's. The creature, clad in a black color that seemed to have been born from the darkness itself, revealed its shining, blood-soaked pupils. At the same time, it made one of its weapons apparent: instead of possessing a sword, that being had a gaping mouth filled with countless fangs, each lined up to form a saw-like pattern.

"Should I call that thing a Dark... *Beast*?"

It was easy to notice that the creature's appearance was quite different from the usual Dark Knight, but Mira could clearly sense the link between her and that summoned being. Consequently, she could understand that the ability she had used was successful and that the thing in front of her was the result of the summoning process. Then, after realizing that fact, Mira decided to name her servant based solely on its looks.

The being that had appeared after the girl took the Demon's Crystal and performed the attribute shifted summon was, one way or another, a monster. Its body, made up by a combination of traits from wild beasts such as lions and tigers, seemed to have been forcibly clad in a warped, distorted version of the Dark Knight's armor. The magic power that had been scattered by the summoning ritual was on the Dark Beast, sticking to it like some kind of viscous blood. In addition, that substance slightly flickered, giving an

impression that the monster was breathing through its entire body.

With such a bizarre appearance, anyone could easily expect the Dark Beast to begin rampaging on the spot, but it simply stayed by Mira's side, waiting for further orders as it lied down on the ground, in a posture resembling that of a hungry beast aiming for its prey.

"Hmm, at least I guess that it will listen to my orders."

At first glance, she couldn't feel the slightest traces of intelligence within the summoned being; however, since it obeyed a simple command given by her, Mira looked up at it and made that assertion.

Meanwhile, in the battle between the Cockatrice and the Dark Knights, the injuries suffered by both parties were still too small when compared with the damage done to their surroundings. On the demonic beast's side, not only did it obtain a self-healing ability, but its toughness also greatly increased. On the knight's side, albeit limited, they also possessed a regenerative power and their evasion abilities were high. Even then, that battle did not seem to be heading to a stalemate, since the Dark Knights were superior due to their numbers and coordination, so if the fight were to continue without any changes, sooner or later they would obtain victory against their foe.

Yet, at that pace, it was clear that they would only be able to finish everything by sunset.

"Let me see, how about you show me your true strength?"

Speaking to the Dark Beast, Mira looked at the battlefield and, after waiting for the right time, pulled back her three knights. The rampaging Cockatrice didn't even care that its enemies were suddenly trying to move away, and simply charged blindly toward the foes before it. While concentrating solely on destruction, the demonic beast shook the ground as it ran with its thick, tree-like legs, and exactly when it tried to thrust its large body against the knights, something happened.

Accompanied by a dull and heavy metallic noise, as if something had exploded below the earth, the entire place was filled with the sound of the ground rumbling. A moment later, that sound was substituted by the roaring cry of the Cockatrice, full of grief. Cutting into the battleground, the Dark Beast had stopped with its whole body the strike coming from the Cockatrice's large build. Enraged, the demonic beast brandished its neck to snap against the new enemy that had appeared, but Mira's new summon howled and, at the same time, used its gaping mouth to return the bite, with the clear intention of ripping off the attacker's flesh. Seemingly suffering, the Cockatrice's dragon-like tail hit the ground countless times, shaking the ground and releasing a booming sound with every strike.

(So it does not understand detailed orders, huh… I wonder if the only instructions it follows are "stay" and "attack"...)

In the same way as what she had done with her Dark Knights, the young girl sent several orders to her beast. Nonetheless, every single one of them was ignored and the Dark Beast merely continued its fight. In other words, it could be said that, currently, the creature was acting on its own instincts.

"Guess I need to… check it first."

While looking away from what was happening in front of her eyes, Mira murmured some kind of excuse.

◆◆◆

"Just… what happened here?"

"Hm? Ooh, is that you, Reynard?"

The instant Mira heard a voice by her side calling out to her, she turned around and saw both Reynard and Joachim there. With a stiff expression, they were looking at what was unfolding before them—a deadly battle in which both sides completely disregarded their own defenses and focused on attacking only.

"Although the one over there seems to have suffered a considerable change in its appearance, I believe I can recognize it as the Cockatrice. But the other one..."

Seemingly worried as he fixed his eyes on the situation in front of him, Joachim still calmly analyzed it. Neither of the two beasts were pulling back and, while still entangled in their battle, tried to destroy each other's bodies with pure, undiluted violence. Fang against fang, claw against claw, roar against roar. Even while dyed in their own blood, instead of decreasing their pace, the Cockatrice and Dark Beast raged on, their battle actually intensifying more and more.

"This is what happened after I performed a summon."

Not knowing what to say anymore about that situation, Mira pointed out what she had done and shrugged.

The three just stared, dumbfounded, at the scene unfolding before them. If one were to dare to express that spectacle in words, it would surely be something out of a *tokusatsu* movie[16], where two monsters fought in a great decisive battle. So great they have reached a point at which no one could see the small birds that were flying from the surrounding woods anymore, and even the critters that inhabited the nearby places had completely fled to take refuge from that maelstrom of fury.

"By the way, I cannot see Garrett around here. Where is he?"

Asked the girl, trying to forcefully change the topic.

"Ah, I left the task of taking care of the monsters' corpses to him. Usually, I am the one in charge of that, but he asked to do the job so I could rush to your aid, Mira-sama. And surely, if we are talking about an opponent on the level of the Cockatrice, of course I would feel worried. However, now I see that there was no need to assist you in battle..."

Answered Joachim as he gazed, with a distant look on his face, at the two rampaging monsters. Immediately after, a ray of red light surged from the other side of the battlefield.

(That Garrett... he does not need to worry about me.)

Upon seeing the swaying, crimson column of fire blazing in the distance, rather than imagining the flames burning everything, Mira envisioned Garrett's figure there, his face showing a bright smile while he operated the jeep's turret. After a short while, it seemed like the disposal of corpses had finished

as the pillar of flame lost strength and began disappearing.

Then, at that moment, something red was once again launched towards the sky. In quick succession, a certain shriek resounded across the grasslands, cutting off the usual howls of intimidation the beasts had been launching against each other just a few seconds ago. The cry, that came out of the Cockatrice's throat, was a sign to the shower of fluttering red in the air: the demonic beast's own blood. Looking carefully, it was possible to notice that one of its wings had been ripped from the base, and the blood was gushing forth from that wound.

"How… fierce."

Was what Reynard muttered, involuntarily. With a keen gaze directed toward the Dark Beast, a creature able to fight against a Cockatrice that had its ferocity boosted, the Knight realized how bottomless was the area of summoning, causing his evaluation of Mira to gradually change.

The Dark Beast then made a motion to spit something it had been holding with its mouth, revealing an abundant amount of blood dripping from that place. What actually fell on the ground was the Cockatrice's lost wing, its tragically sorry state indicating how savage the entire fight was.

And yet, the demonic beast did not stop, for its eye still shone with both insanity and the will to fight. When it warded off its foe's charge with the remaining wing, the Cockatrice's massive body shook violently, apparently dragged by the swinging action of that impromptu shield. Taking into account its excessively large build, the Cockatrice's sense of balance had been broken the moment it lost one of its wings, so it couldn't control its movements after thrusting itself with the mighty physical strength it possessed.

That opportunity wasn't overlooked by Mira's summoned beast. As soon as the Cockatrice staggered, the Dark Beast firmly planted its four legs on the ground and split its mouth open, seemingly ready to roar. Instead, escaping from the bottom of the monster's throat was a blinding, glimmering light.

"This magical power is…"

Sensing the enormous amount of magical power being gathered inside the Dark Beast's mouth, Joachim opened his eyes wide in surprise. Promptly, right before the black monstrosity steadied its aim, the Cockatrice turned around and swung in a huge arc its tail—covered in thick and tough scales—to deliver a strike against the side of its enemy's face. Accompanied by a heavy and dull impact sound, the Dark Beast's body swayed dangerously. However, that wasn't enough to stop it, because a split second after getting hit, the beast released a beam of light from its mouth.

A thunderous roar resounded in the distance and even the air itself trembled as soon as the that dazzling flash came out. In spite of that, the beam didn't hit the Cockatrice directly. What saved the demonic beast from the line of fire was its tail strike, which managed to turn away the Dark Beast's face. With the aiming disturbed, the light ray gouged the ground and teared open the forest in its path. In addition, as if giving the finishing blow, explosive flames erupted from the trenches that had just been formed, by the wave of

light, on the grasslands' surface.

Before everyone's eyes, the scene that unfolded was akin to the episode of an apocalyptic war being acted out. As they looked at the towering walls of dust that had been formed, each whirling to the tune of a tremendous rumbling, Reynard and Joachim weren't the only ones standing still, looking stupefied; even Mira herself couldn't help but display the same reaction.

Nonetheless, disregarding the three onlookers' state, the battle continued. Appearing to struggle for the very air that transmitted them, two deep and angry roars filled the surroundings. And then, all of a sudden, one of the air-shattering sounds vanished.

It was the Cockatrice's voice. The demonic beast's large body fell, taking with it the fierce howls it had been releasing. At a closer look, its left leg had been cleanly burned to ashes from the knee down. It seemed like the beam of light had completely missed its target, but it actually slightly grazed the demon's leg.

"Looks like the fight is over."

Although it now lied on the ground, through the shine on its sole pupil, the injured beast still showed a will to continue the battle; however, against the foe it had been fighting on almost even grounds, without one wing and a leg its chances of winning were gone. Realizing that, Reynard revealed a somewhat relieved expression on his face. Afterwards, the Dark Beast that was calmly standing in place just needed to finish off the writhing Cockatrice, be it by swinging down its claws or by stabbing the demon's body with its fangs.

Instead, what came a moment later made a chill run down the spines of the observers. The Dark Beast had braced itself on its four legs, mouth wide open.

"This magical power…! Does it intend to shoot that thing again!?"

After a single look at the terrible spectacle promoted by the monster's previous attack, Joachim asked a question in panic, to which Mira promptly turned her face away and hesitated to speak. She did try to do it several times already, but as expected, the Dark Beast wasn't following any of her detailed commands. In other words, it could be said that the girl's summoned beast had been merely acting on its own instincts.

"Hey… this might be worse than the one from earlier."

Said Reynard while directing his sight once more towards the monster. Since it apparently had enough time now, the magic energy being gathered for the light beam had already exceeded the amount used for the previous one; furthermore, with each second that passed, the accumulated power grew even stronger. In proportion to that growth in strength, the light leaking out of the Dark Beast's mouth began shining brightly, its form resembling that of sharp blades. It was as if the sun itself was being held hostage deep inside the beast's throat, giving the dangerous feeling that it could end up exploding at any moment.

The first ray of light had been launched when the monster, after taking the same posture it displayed now, charged the attack for about two or three

seconds. But currently, it had already been accumulating power for around ten seconds. With that amount of magical power amassed, one could only wonder about how strong the attack would be. Instantly, the image of everything in her field of view getting razed to the ground, scorched, passed through the girl's mind. That thought wasn't an exaggeration, as even Joachim envisioned a similar scenery after observing the large quantity of magical energy being accumulated.

Immediately, a huge magic circle appeared at the Dark Beast's feet. It shone in the same poisonous-looking color of the previous magic circle used to summon the beast, but instead of summoning, it began to pull the black monster in. As soon as Mira had cancelled her summon, the process of sending the beast away began. Almost like dragging it back into the gates of hell, the pulsating magic circle was swallowing the Dark Beast, a scene that took the three observers' breath away.

Still facing the Cockatrice even as it was being dismissed, the monster revealed in its eyes the will to fight. When the only thing left to disappear in the circle was its head, the brightness coming from the Dark Beast's mouth increased in an instant.

"Mira-sama!"

"On it!"

A split second later, Mira gave a command to her Dark Knight on standby. Then, dashing like the wind, the knight followed its summoner's orders and hit the Dark Beast right in the jaw. Simultaneously, a flash clad in a spectacular radiance surged toward the heavens. As the condensed magical energy pierced through the sky and above, it eventually dispersed, turning into miniscule particles of light that kept raining all around the place. By now, the Dark Beast —the main culprit of that grand show—was nowhere to be found, its dismissal process concluded.

Despite finally feeling a sense of relief, the three people caught sight of another problem. With the wound on its leg closed, the Cockatrice let out a groan and forced itself up from the ground. Then, even without a wing and a leg, the demonic beast released a roar filled with madness, making a display of the overwhelming insanity it possessed.

"It might be wounded, but don't even think of getting careless."

"I know that."

To the intense show of vigor before them, once again both Reynard and Joachim braced themselves, ready to face their enemy.

"Step back. This one is my responsibility."

While stopping the other two with a hand, Mira faced the Cockatrice. Shortly after that, all of a sudden, nearly twenty Dark Knights appeared and surrounded the beast in the blink of an eye.

"Hngh…!"

"Now that is something..."

Seeing the unexpected appearance of the group of knights, the Knight and the Expert revealed an expression of astonishment on their faces. Forget the Summoning Experts in the army, not even Cleos, the Elder Substitute, could do something like simultaneously summoning in an instant that number of Dark Knights. Just what kind of meaning did the title of Sage's Pupil hold? While the two were at a loss for words to describe how bottomless it appeared to be, the fight had been settled.

Even with its body covered in wounds, the Cockatrice still held the advantage in physical strength. On the other hand, that wasn't enough to beat the sheer number of foes and their violent strikes; as a result, its knee gave up and, for the second time, the demonic beast fell on the ground. Then, there was no way for the Cockatrice to resist anymore, so its entire body suffered all the slashing and piercing attacks coming from the swarm of knights, at a rate that its regenerative power couldn't keep up with. Blood gushed out from several places on the demon's body, causing the earth below it to become quickly dyed in dark red.

At first sight, what was there looked like a small hill of squirming black, but with a closer inspection of the scene, it appeared as the performance of a lynch mob. Around them, the Dark Beast's parting gift continued to fall in the form of a rain of light, causing one to wonder just how much magical power had been collected for the attack.

If the observers were to turn around, they would see shining light particles fluttering all over the richly colored flower field, the gentle addition of the wind evoking the image of a smiling angel, its whispers sparkling in the air. Standing in a place that could be said to be between Heaven and Hell, Reynard and Joachim quietly turned to face the "Heaven" side.

Chapter 20

The group of Dark Knights had finally, and without any problems, brought an end to the demonic beast Cockatrice. As Joachim used his sorcery to take care of the cleanup job, burning the beast's and the Lesser Demon's corpses, Garrett joined up with them, a plain look of disappointment on his face. It seemed like he still wanted to shoot the Jeep's cannon. Then, with their mission finished, the party set out on their return journey, smiling brightly as if nothing had happened.

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Sometime around evening. While giving her report in the King's Office of the Arkite Castle, Mira nibbled a late snack, relaxed. As for Solomon, he listened attentively to his friend's recounts, giving the occasional affirmative responses and, at the same time, looked over the report done by Joachim, written during his trip back to the castle.

"The Lesser Demon cursed the Cockatrice? Yeah, never heard of anything like that happening in the thirty years I've been living here. To begin with, this is the first time in, like, ten years since we had a Lesser Demon appearing here."

"Is that so? I wonder what the hell was that… just when I thought the mist would simply disappear, that thing happened out of nowhere."

"Well, you have my thanks for taking care of it."

There was a huge, near-infinite wall of differences between the past and the present. Consequently, the girl thought that what she had seen happening for the first time was, one way or another, a fact already well known in the new world. And yet, the occurrence of a living creature being cursed by the substance of malice was also a first for Solomon.

"A Lesser Demon... makes you wonder, just where did it come out from?"

After reading the report, the King placed it on his desk and mumbled, deep in thought.

"Indeed. And if that demon is involved, it definitely is something troublesome."

"I have no doubts. In any case, we have to at least identify its place of origin before stranger things happen."

"Hmm, the place of origin..."

As Solomon, with a sigh, heavily dropped his body on the chair, Mira followed him by leaning her entire frame on the sofa, a groan escaping her lips and revealing her worried thoughts. When it was still a game, the Lesser Demon was an existence that only appeared during certain quests. And said quests were mostly accompanied by a bad ending. Mira recalled those past

events while stuffing her cheeks with cookies. Then, the moment she gulped down all those snacks with some black tea, the figure of a certain individual appeared in her mind.

"Oh, right… what was that person's name again..."

"Hm? Who?"

Although she had a clear image in her head, the young girl couldn't remember the most important part—their name—so, while pursing her lips, she squinted and searched within her memories. Seeing his friend, who always had a problem with remembering names, Solomon welcomed for a few moments the nostalgic feelings in his heart as he listened to her once again.

"Come on, it is that guy who carried a massive amount of holy water with him and chased Lesser Demons around, I remember he was an NPC that specialized in demons."

"Aahh, are you talking about Howard?"

"Yes! That one!"

When Solomon instantly said the name that Mira had forgotten, the girl pointed towards him and indicated he was correct—all the while still holding a half-eaten cookie in her mouth.

"Hmm, if I'm not wrong, I believe he's already dead. Since the first time we've seen him, he already looked pretty old, you know."

Howard, the man who researched demons. He was an aloof, old guy who treated everyone with his medicinal beverages brewed with holy water.

"Was that so? Well, I believed he might have known something about it."

Upon hearing that fact, Mira slowed down her hand but still continued to bring snacks to her mouth. Immediately, she was struck with another bright idea.

"If he is dead, then there is something we can still do. Correct me if I am wrong, but there existed a mirror that could let you talk with the deceased, right?"

"Yeah, the Mirror of Governing Shadows. But the problem here is that, in order to talk with the dead person, we either need to have made a strong connection with them while they were alive or possess an article that the deceased considered dear to them."

"Huumm, you are right."

Since her relationship with Howard was, at most, related to questing, Mira couldn't say she had a strong connection with him. Moreover, she had no such article or item that could meet the Mirror's requirements. Sipping her tea in an apparent bad mood, the girl absentmindedly let her gaze wander around.

"Come to think of it, there was a quest with a cursed mirror..."

"Yep. And if I remember correctly, along the way you would come across Howard, huh."

"Right? He would suddenly sprinkle holy water on you."

Prompted by the "Mirror of Governing Shadows" keywords, Solomon was reminded of the good old days, a period when they were still playing a game. Then, for a short while, the two friends had a lively talk, reminiscing their past.

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"Ah, that's right!"

Abruptly, Solomon shouted as a certain thought crossed his mind; in turn, the girl asked him to explain what he meant.

"Luminaria interrupted us when we were discussing it, right? The matter about searching for the missing Elders."

"Now that you mention it, there was that subject, yeah."

Who, and how she would search for. Yesterday, when they were about to discuss that matter, Luminaria had entered the office. The moment she remembered it, Mira poured some black tea for herself, removed her shoes and stretched her legs on the sofa, preparing for a long conversation.

"So, I will look for them, fine. But do you know where they might be? If we do not have any clues, it will be impossible to catch **those** people."

Just like Mira had said, the Nine Sages were a group of misfits. Perhaps, they might be simply wandering about, following their own whims. Consequently, there was no way for anyone other than the person themselves to know their whereabouts. Since the girl was asked to search for those wanderers, how would she even begin that task?

Tilting her teacup, Mira decided to leave that question to Solomon, considering she still couldn't fully comprehend the new reality she was placed in.

"It was the Mirror of Governing Shadows. It made me recall about this discussion. Do you remember where the mirror was located? There is only one person that could easily be found there, right?"

The young girl began to ponder about it immediately. That item, a mirror that reflected the deceased, resided somewhere in the underground of a temple; then, as soon as she reached that part, the figure of a certain person crossed Mira's mind.

"I see, it is Soul Howl."

"Correct."

He was the Elder of the Tower of Necromancy, 『Soul Howl the Giant Wall』, an individual who held a near-pathological love for undead girls.

Deep inside the dungeon 『Archaic Temple Nebulapolis』, nicknamed among players the "Underground Graveyard", existed the Mirror of Governing Shadows. In the past, when they had explored it with every member of the Elders, Soul Howl called the place a *paradise*. To him, the dungeon that

gathered a great number and variety of undead monsters could easily be considered a sacred place. Since he was stated as *online* in the friend list but wasn't in his own tower, investigating Soul Howl's most likely location could be worth a try.

"And then, while you're at it, you can also try to use the mirror and contact Howard there, right? There's nothing to lose if you just try anyway."

"Yeah. Who knows, maybe if I bring a lot of holy water with me it might even work."

"Great, one way or another, you could say that item is like a synonym for the old guy."

Both friends laughed at that exchange. An ordinary person wouldn't be able to understand that, but apparently it was a common point of humor between players.

"But the Underground Graveyard, huh… it is a bit far from here. If only I could use my Floating Continent it would be perfect."

"I'll leave you to deal with… nah, I'm providing some backup for you there. However, since this is roughly a top-secret mission, I can't use neither the Thousand-mile nor the Home carriages."

When Solomon was about to say something, he stopped for a moment and then indicated he would be giving some sort of support. *See it by yourself, feel delight in all the surprises this world can provide you*. That was the wish within Solomon's heart, for Mira to fully enjoy the world he had spent thirty years of his life in.

"Thousand-mile? Home Carriage? What are those?"

"Ah, the Thousand-mile Carriage is the vehicle that brought you here from the Tower. It was quite fast, right? That's because of the special harnesses equipped on the horses. They make use of ability effects to thoroughly reduce the burden on the animals. It is the fastest carriage in our country."

Proudly answered Solomon, a great smile appearing on his face as he boasted with his chest puffed up.

"Indeed, it was pretty fast. Not on the same level as the Floating Continent, though."

"Just forget about that overpowered item. After all the time I've spent here, I can see just how much of a cheat that item was for us."

Cheat. The King's words were actually reasonable, as the traveling speed of the Floating Continent rivaled that of a common airplane. Even the Armored Jeep, one of Sorcery Engineering's finest works, was no match for it; additionally, the fact that the vehicle had a high consumption rate of fuel, using sealing gems like water, was another setback. As a result, carriages were still the most common means of transport in that world.

"The Home Carriage might not be as fast, but we put up a lot of effort to make the interior as comfortable to live as we could. Simply put, I guess you could call it an RV version of a carriage."

“Oho, that looks good.”

Sipping her black tea, Mira imagined herself lying on a bed inside a slowly running carriage, gulping down an *Apple au Lait* as her eyes gazed at the moving scenery outside the window.

“Surely that Home Carriage would make anyone want to try riding it, huh.”

“Well, one day I’ll let you use it.”

“Hey, come on, you cheapskate. Should it not be fine to send it to the Underground Graveyard?

“I really, really want to do it, but remember that this is a top secret mission. Both the Thousand-mile and the Home Carriages are custom-built vehicles, used mainly for stuff like transporting royalty or attending to national matters. Wherever any of them goes, they might end up attracting too much attention.”

“...And I would like to avoid that.”

“Right? Anyway, I will prepare a normal-looking carriage for you.”

“Okay, got it.”

As she replied with a nod, Mira tossed another cookie in her mouth.

A second later, however, the Office door was opened with a loud bang, startling the girl and causing her to have violent fit of coughing after choking on the snack.

“Mission complete!”

Together with the shout, what appeared there was the figure of a certain person striking a pose, her blazing red hair fluttering around: Luminaria. While throwing an annoying glare at the woman, Mira gulped down the tea she held.

“Good job.”

Solomon raised a hand and said some words of appreciation. He then cast a glance at the map on his desk, reconfirming the four remaining points where a herd of monsters had appeared. Currently in the middle of battle, the units dispatched to those locations had yet to send a completion report. However, there was no problem with that fact; rather, Mira and Luminaria were way too fast to finish their tasks.

“Oh, you’re back already? Maan, and here I thought I would be the first one to return.”

When Luminaria closed the door, she saw the teary-eyed Mira pouring black tea and raised her voice.

“It was close. If you’d arrived around one hour earlier, you would have won.”

“One hoour…? Damn, that was just the difference between our means of transport...”

Already used to doing it, the red-haired woman skillfully sat on a corner of the office desk; but contrary to her tone and words, she didn’t exactly look

disappointed.

"You rode on the Armored Jeep again, right? How was it?"

Luminaria asked, the expression on her face showing that she already knew the answer. Then, after drinking her teacup dry, Mira returned the question with a hateful gaze directed towards that all-knowing face.

"One way or another, the lack of a seatbelt is a clear problem. Or maybe you could have Garrett receive some driving training."

Now looking at Solomon, Mira said that half-jokingly, albeit with an obvious focus on the seriousness of the matter.

"Hear what she said? Come, man, you really should equip a seatbelt on that jeep."

"Huumm, okay okay. I'll try to take that into consideration."

With a reluctant expression, Solomon agreed and took out a camouflage helmet from his desk drawer.

"I believe that using a tank helmet has its own charm, though..."

Muttered the boy while donning the tank headgear, looking somewhat proud even behind the sullen expression he displayed.

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"By the way, now that we are on this subject..."

Starting with that, Solomon retrieved a sheet of paper from the top of his desk and stood up, drawing closer to Mira in an act that evoked the image of a child trying to pester his parent for something.

"So that we can have a better handling of the Armored Jeep, and also for the Accord Cannon's experiments, I want you to make a good number of refining and sealing gems. I will bring all the raw materials for you!!"

After asking for that favor, he presented the paper to his friend. Written there was a detailed list of items, their required numbers and types. Other than it simply being a national interest, the Sorcery Engineering was directly related to his own hobbies, so it was probably for that reason that, right now, the boy's face looked so alive.

"Okay. I see you really need *a lot* of those, huh? So, what is the needed rank of sealing gems?"

Said Mira the moment she received the paper and took a glance at it, fueling Solomon's smile even more.

"As high as you can make them, but I guess we should focus on the number first. Aahh, well, it would be great if at least five of the gems you created were third-grade."

The ranking or grade of a sealing gem indicated the degree of power charged within them, ranging from first-grade for the strongest and seventh-

grade for the weakest gem. Depending on the raw materials used, there was a limit for the ranking of the produced item, so a first-grade sealing gem was, by principle, pretty rare.

"No problem. However, if that is the case, I believe it will be faster if I return to the Tower. For stuff like refining gems I should have too many to count stored within my warehouse. Moreover, I probably have there a reasonable number of refining crystals, refining magic crystals and sealing gems."

"As expected of you. If only you'd arrived in this world faster, we would be already at the production of a Type-10, I guess..."

It could be said that the quantity of sealing gems produced was closely related to the progress of the Sorcery Engineering. Therefore, Solomon's words were not an exaggeration, and if they had access to all the refining materials hoarded by the very developer of refining techniques, they would have advanced one, two levels above their current progress right now.

"Why did you not ask, like, Mariana for the items if you needed them that much? Even in my absence, she is still able to enter my place—I left her with the job of sorting every item there, you know?"

Of course, to use the contents of the storehouse that was located within the private room in the Tower, one had to first *enter* the room; but the only individuals who could do that freely were the Elder of that Tower and their own aide.

"Well… that was the problem. You see, I once asked if there were any refining and sealing gems in your storage. '*Could I have some if you find them there?*' was what I requested..."

Said Solomon with a bitter smile as he suddenly turned around and sat on the sofa.

"Was that so? Then what? Did you end up using everything?"

"Aaahh… you see… she didn't listen to me, *at all*. Mariana said that even if I am the one asking, she wouldn't hand over *your* items willfully. There was something about it being her mission to protect that place, so that you wouldn't be inconvenienced after your return—and you would definitely return, she added... while also *crying*. Obviously, there was no way I would force her to do it."

"Exactly. I was there too and, damn, she looked like she could even give up her life to protect that place. Talk about being stubborn."

"I… see..."

Hearing her friends, Mira thought once again about Mariana, who had been waiting for such a long time to see the return of Dunbalf.

(Maybe, at the very least, I should tell Mariana the truth.)

The figure of a young girl with a beautiful, sapphire-like hair, looking downward in a desolate manner appeared in Mira's mind. Perhaps, Mira herself could be her savior and make the girl once again raise that face. The ideal man

she'd aimed to be would never leave behind a girl crying; as soon as she realized that, Mira made the decision to be frank with Mariana and tell the truth the next moment they meet. The girl etched into her mind that, rather than the momentary feeling of shame that she would be afflicted with after disregarding everything and telling the truth, confessing was something much more important to her.

"There you have it. I'll leave the storehouse portion to your own judgement. The portion that I asked before will be good enough for now. Later, I'll get you to the Refining Room."

"Alright, then let me make the gems before going to bed."

"Heh, if any of our refining engineers were to hear what you just said I bet they would faint."

With an extremely happy smile, Luminaria talked as she bent her upper body, supporting herself with both hands on the table she was using as a seat. The refining engineers in the castle were busy day and night, so if they were to witness the speed at which Mira performed her refining, there was a risk that they would fall into a completely hopeless state.

"...I will have the materials and the refining table sent to your bedroom."

Picturing such a scene in his head, Solomon told Mira he wanted her to refine the items in secret, with no one else around. While replying with, "*I do not mind*," the girl placed her teacup on the table.

"Just something, though. If you wish, would it not be better if you guys were able to do it yourselves?"

"Well, that might've been my best option. Like our technology progress, that is still quite slow, our current production pace can barely keep up. Do you have any good techniques to help?"

The boy looked at Mira, his eyes full of expectation.

"Hmm, it will depend on your own hard work. Got a pen and paper?"

"Yes, err, let me see… here they are."

After taking a fountain pen that was on the desk and retrieving a parchment from its shelf, Solomon handed them to Mira.

"Just wait a moment."

With the objects in her hands, the girl unfolded the parchment on the table and began filling it with symbols and characters.

"Okay, I am done. Show this to your 'refining engineers' later, okay?"

"Humm. The hell's this? Can't understand shit here."

Snatching the parchment from the girl's hands, Luminaria stared at the figures and symbols drawn on it, her face frowning. In but a few moments, she gave up and pushed the sheet to Solomon.

"This is… yes… I can understand they are related to refining. I should show this to them, right? Got it."

“Good, I am counting on you.”

The things Mira wrote on the parchment were the configurations for a brand new refining table, one she had invented and researched since long ago. The small details needed were omitted and scribbled on the margin of the paper as special instructions.

In the distant future, that parchment would help revolutionize the Sorcery Engineering, but no one would have imagined that yet.

“Now then, going back to our previous discussion. I have already made the preparations for your carriage, so tomorrow morning you can already depart towards the Underground Graveyard and begin your search.”

While saying that, Solomon took off his tank helmet and *very carefully* returned it to the drawer.

“That is a bit too fast for me. I still want to take a break and rest a few days here...”

As she stretched her whole body, Mira insisted she was completely spent.

“Really? Are you staying here for some more time then? Okay, but know that I prepared for you to leave earlier than usual because I was thinking of you.”

“You did it for me?”

She casted a dubious glance in the King’s direction. Mira had absolutely no idea of what she could possibly gain from departing sooner.

“Yeah. If you’re going to stay, then my maids will be elated, but, of course, I believe you will be the complete opposite of that, right?”

“What? What are you trying to imply there?”

“I heard something from my Head Maid. They had received a burst of inspiration after seeing the robe you wore, and now it looks like all the maids are working to make you new outfits.”

Solomon was all smiles after relaying that information and seemed to be greatly enjoying the situation; Luminaria also chimed in, saying, “*You’re so lucky*,” as she laughed.

“I am… leaving as soon as the day breaks tomorrow.”

“Huhuhu, alright. I will inform the others of that.”

There was no way that clothes inspired by a faux magical girl-esque dress would turn out as something normal. As a result, Mira decided to quickly run away from the castle.

“What a bunch of weirdos...”

Disgust welling up from the bottom of her heart, the girl complained and immediately stood up.

“Where is the toilet?”

“Behind that door over there.”

When Mira asked, Solomon pointed towards a small door in a corner of the Office.

"I am borrowing it for a little bit."

Together with those few words, the young girl opened the door in a hurry and disappeared inside that room. Left on the table were the empty teapot and several cookies.

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"When it comes to a king's toilet, I bet that just renting it might cost like a hundred thousand."

After a short pause, although Mira returned from the restroom feeling refreshed, she also said, at the same time, something that only a complete commoner would let escape from their mouth. A second later, the girl was immediately captured by the red-haired woman, who had been lying in wait for her prey with an invigorating smile on her face.

"Then, why don't we go to a one million bathhouse next?"

And just like that, being carried under her friend's arms, Mira was taken to the castle's large bath.

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Having finished their bath, Mira, Solomon and Luminaria had dinner together. Afterwards, they moved to the Office and spent a pretty long period of time talking about trivial matters—it was just a silly conversation between close friends. In the middle of it, when Solomon's military discussion began to show its signs, the young girl softly yawned.

"Oh wow, look at the time."

Upon seeing the sleepy Mira, Luminaria checked the present time and confirmed that soon it would be midnight.

"It went by pretty fast."

Also confirming the time, Mira gulped down the rest of her *Apple au Lait* and greatly stretched her body.

"Shall we call it a night? Let's continue it next time."

"Ah, yes. Of course."

It would have been a complete borefest if the military discussion were to actually continue, but after a good night of sleep he would probably forget about it, so Mira agreed without much thought.

"Your bedroom is the same as yesterday's. Do you remember where it is?"

"Yes, it is okay."

Secretly leaving the empty bottle of *Apple au Lait* on the sofa, Mira stood up and walked towards the door.

"Then, I am going ahead."

"Okay, good night."

"If you have to wake up early, try to take your *nightly activities* in moderation and get enough sleep."

"Do not lump me with the likes of you. Good night."

Directing a glance towards the smiling Solomon and then changing it to Luminaria, whose habitual grin was plastered all over her face, Mira sent her good-nights and left the Office at the same time.

Chapter 21

As the sun rose on a brand new day, the area around the castle began to slowly flourish with people.

While half-awake, Mira walked with unsteady steps towards the bathroom, her mind still slow to completely dispel her sleepiness. Then, when she returned after doing her task, she just dropped her body on the bed without a second thought, resulting in a certain something to spring up and land on the young girl's hand.

"What is this…?"

The moment she tried to grab that "something" and fling it away, Mira recognized, through her faintly opened eyes, rabbit ears bobbing up and down —and immediately jumped to her feet. At the same time, a piece of paper that had fallen nearby caught her attention.

〖*We have prepared a set of pajamas for you. Please, it would be our greatest bliss if you were to wear them—The Castle Maids*〗

An extraordinary feeling of dread assaulted the girl. Currently, she was only in her underwear and the culprit was right before her eyes. Together with that written note, pajamas that looked more like a bunny costume had been laid out for her; as a matter of course, she had pretended not to see them.

Solomon's words from yesterday crossed her mind. She had been told by her friend that all the maids were engrossed in creating a new outfit for her. And that was merely their first step, as the costume revealed a glimpse of how serious and fast those maids could be when doing useless work.

Opening the menu in a great hurry, Mira tried to confirm the current time: 8:45 in the morning, the clock indicated. It could be said that she had a completely late start in the race to escape from being treated like a dress-up doll. With only unpleasant thoughts passing through her mind, Mira tried to find what she could do next to escape from that predicament, alarms going off with every second that passed.

However, the girl's thought process was forcibly terminated by a light knock on the bedroom's door.

"Mira-sama, good morning. I have brought your clothing."

A woman called out to the girl, from the other side of the door, in a slightly excited voice. Mira then realized that there was no escaping her fate now.

(There it is, she came here to bring the outfit!)

In a rush, Mira looked around the bedroom, but the only clothes she found there were the bunny pajamas and a cute one piece dress she had used right after leaving the bath. Although the young girl desperately sought for a way out of that situation, the time-out signal finally reached her ears.

"Hmm, there's no answer... maybe she is still asleep. Oh no, at this rate, the breakfast is going to get cold. I must go in and directly wake Mira-sama

up. Yes, I must offer my help.”

As if reading from a script, the woman spoke in a monotone way and, afterward, opened the door. Immediately, the first thing the maid saw in that bedroom was Mira’s small buttocks.

Having fallen into a slight state of panic, the girl had the idea to dive head first onto the bed. And that was the extent of her hastily made idea. She was the literal example of the ostrich policy[17], her head hidden and bottom exposed.

“Mi~ra~sa~ma. Good morning.”

Using quick and light steps, the maid ran up to Mira and, after gently lifting the bedding made of fine feathers, confronted the bitterly smiling girl with a smile of her own while also renewing her greetings.

“Ye… yeah. Morning.”

“I have been appointed as your personal maid assistant, Mira-sama. My name is Lily. I am looking forward to working with you.”

“I… I see...”

While feeling ashamed from her excessively foolish behavior, Mira was also at her wits’ end in anguish, having seen the thing that was on the maid Lily’s hands: forget about the faux dress she had been wearing, that new one had a full-blown magical girl-esque style.

Especially because of the white and black colors used as its basis, at a glance that outfit, made without any excess of fabric, gave off a feeling similar to a gothic lolita costume. The white, sleeveless dress and a—rather short—black flared skirt combined to form a single piece of clothing; then, to complete the outfit, a coat, resembling a robe with just its front split open, was worn over the dress. In the end, being denied most of her demands, she was dressed up in that outfit and thus the Extraordinarily Beautiful Magical Girl Mira was born, the frills and ribbons on her new clothing way more emphasized than the previous one. At least, amidst that despairing situation, Mira had one of her wishes granted: instead of lace underwear, she begged for something plain-looking, similar to the one she was wearing at the time of the request.

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After she finished changing clothes, Mira was dragged against her will to the Maid’s Quarters, the only place within the castle where men weren’t allowed to enter. There, in one of the rooms, she was currently surrounded by an incredible number of maids.

“Okay, Mira-sama. Please raise your hands in a *hooray*[18].”

When asked by Lily, who carried a measuring tape, the girl obliged and held both hands up in the air. Her eyes were already devoid of life as she had been reduced to a mere puppet that obediently did as told.

They were now in the middle of measuring the girl's chest area. Although the maid could be somewhat flexible with the choice of panties, the same couldn't be said of the bra; if Mira were to choose and wear one that did not fit her properly, problems would occur in the distant future. Since Lily made sure to stress that point, Mira resigned herself to her fate and muttered, "Just do as you please then…," and that is how they reached the present situation.

In fact, the young girl had not done any serious physical exertion to warrant a problem for her, but she still felt, over and over, a rubbing sensation caused by the robe coming into contact with her bare skin. In what sounded like a semi attempt at intimidation, all the other maids said that staying in a bra-less state like that would later make Mira feel great pain even at the slight touch. Nonetheless, at that point she had already given up and simply stopped caring about what the women did.

"You have such a great figure. I'm getting jealous..."

"I see..."

Lily turned towards Mira's back after successfully taking the girl's rough measurements and gently wrapped, with both hands, the two small mounds on that chest to accurately determine their size.

(When will this torture end…?)

Having grasped in every detail the chest measurements—against the absentminded girl's will, it must be said—Lily directed various instructions to the other maids and they promptly brought an ideally sized bra.

"How is it, Mira-sama? Does it hurt? Is it too tight for you to breathe?"

"Hmm, it is okay. But one way or another, I cannot feel at ease with it..."

"It should be fine then. You see, the first time is like that for everyone."

As soon as the bra was gracefully adjusted and put on her chest, she felt the underwear applying some slight pressure against it; at the same time, Mira breathed a magnificent sigh after looking at her own appearance.

Every single maid there wanted to, with all their hearts, entertain that important guest, whose concern about clothing was inexistent. Although they seemed to be just having a lot of fun, those were professional maids, after all, and both their work and coordination were nothing less than perfect. In the blink of an eye, they finished measuring not only Mira's chest, but her entire body. Afterwards, the maids talked enthusiastically with each other, as they would now be able to create the perfect costu—*the perfect clothes* for Mira, ones that would fit even better than her current clothing, since it had been prepared with unreliable measurements, only done by eye. The girl did not realize that yet, but right during her next visit to the castle, she would be facing the maids' real deal.

Moving away from the other women's gazes, Mira was guided by Lily to the dining hall and had breakfast there; the light but balanced meal, with bread and soup, salad, fruit juice and others, actually managed to bring her back to her senses. In a corner of the dining room sat a magical girl, a cheerful expression on her face as she slowly took small sips of her fruit juice. Keeping

an eye on her with an affable look was the old lady that commanded the mess hall and, nearby, Lily—who was all smiles. The girl's attire had suited her to an unimaginable degree and, naturally, attracted the attention of everyone in the surroundings.

It was only when the "magical girl" took the last sip of her juice that she finally raised her face and noticed all the gazes focused on herself.

(What the… is that everyone looking at me?)

Even though she revealed how weary she was of the surroundings, Mira's state as she restlessly looked around only served to instigate the women's desire to protect that panicky little girl. In fact, Lily herself was squirming in place while seeing Mira act like a helpless, small animal. The problem was that, to the girl who still wasn't used to being the center of attention, it seemed like she was just being too conspicuous—*and in a bad way*. Feeling completely out of place, Mira vigorously stood up and rushed out of the dining room without so much as a glance back.

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When Mira left the mess hall, she was appeased by her maid assistant and conducted to the Office.

"I have brought Mira-sama to you, Solomon-sama."

Lily knocked on the door and spoke to the person on the other side.

"Good, come in."

"Pardon my intrusion."

Upon hearing Solomon's reply, the maid calmly opened the door and bowed. Then, after Mira entered the room, she closed that same door without making a single sound and waited outside.

"Hey there, 'morning."

"Yeah, 'morning."

The girl returned the greeting and dropped down on the sofa, looking utterly tired. When Solomon glanced at her outfit, he quickly covered his mouth with a hand as his shoulders began to tremble, earning him a strong glare from Mira.

"Did you have a good night's sleep?"

"Yes. I slept so well I could not escape in time from the maids."

Mira replied, seemingly sulking, and her friend's face simply broke out in an incredible smile.

"Hey, you look good in it. As expected of the maids from my castle."

"I would be completely fine with a normal robe."

Holding the hem of her skirt, the young girl revealed a wry smile as she

shook and made the skirt flutter around. In truth, it was something so well crafted one would seriously doubt it had been finished in just a day or two.

"By the way, looks like you have made the things I've requested during yesterday's night, huh?"

"Indeed. Aahh, now that you mention it, I think I forgot them in the bedroom."

The King's words brought a memory to Mira's mind. Yesterday night, when she returned to the bedroom, the refining materials and table had already been arranged there for her, so she quickly used them to finish the items her friend had requested.

"One of my maids brought them to me after you left your room. With this we'll be able to do some really productive experiments for a while. Thanks."

"That was nothing, do not worry about it."

Mira answered as if what she had done was completely natural and, while worrying about an absolutely unfamiliar sensation that arose from her chest, put her weight on the back of the sofa.

"Oh right. Before I forget, let me give this to you."

As he informed the girl, Solomon threw a pouch to her, a faint and metallic jingling sound coming from it.

"Hmm, what is this?"

She asked, shaking the bag to make even more sounds.

"It's money, you know? The funds for the job you're going to do from now on."

"Come on, I thought it was something else. Still, I already have so much money it would be pointless to take this."

"Ah, really? Did you have some deposited in the warehouse of your tower?"

"What do you mean? I have it right here with..."

Saying that, the girl tried to retrieve her money, but stopped on her tracks a moment later. She had attempted to pull around 100 Rifu applying the same kind of "feeling" that was used when playing the game; however, nothing came out. Incidentally, Rifu was the currency unit of that world.

"Ah, did you notice it? Did you just realize your situation now?"

Solomon's face revealed a mischievous smile.

Although Mira hurried to open the "Status" field in her menu to check her current money, the numbers that had always been there, displaying her finances, were now completely gone. Her entire head shook violently.

"Where did my money go…!?"

"It's the same thing that happened with the Floating Continent. Maybe it was swallowed by waves from the electronic world and disappeared. The majority opinion is that since the money wasn't considered an 'item', it couldn't

get inside the Item Box. It was **something else**, in other words. During the time when we were still playing a game, our money was handled by the game system, but now that we are in the 'real world', that system doesn't work. Well, that's the gist of it, we believe."

"How could this… my two hundred million..."

While paying no heed to about half of her friend's explanation, Mira collapsed on the sofa.

"That's quite the sum you had there… anyway, I had the same reaction when this happened to me..."

As the subject of the Floating Continent reopened the wounds in their hearts, both boy and girl remained silent for a while, looking up at the sky.

"And that's why you can't use money if you don't carry the real thing with you. The pouch in your hands can be considered a reward of sorts for doing all that work yesterday. For the time being, I put 100,000 Rifu there, so you must manage it well—isn't that your forte, anyway?"

Inside the pouch Mira had received, there were several pieces of money: one gold coin, three mithril ones, another three coins made of silver, four cobalt coins and ten pieces crafted with copper. Respectively, each kind of coin corresponded to fifty thousand, ten thousand, five thousand, one thousand and, finally, a hundred Rifu.

"One hundred… one hundred thousand…?"

"Hey come on now, forget about that already. I know *you* will be able to earn even more in no time. Losing my money's already water under the bridge for me. Yeah, water under the bridge..."

According to the rules of the game system, it was impossible to have your money stolen and even one of the penalties for dying only involved the loss of items contained within the player's Item Box, leaving their money intact; consequently, there had been no need to deposit one's own money in a warehouse. But now that mindset had backfired on them.

"Okay, I just remembered something after telling you about the money. Have you already used your Item Box since arriving in this world?"

Being brought back to his senses, Solomon recalled some of the changes that had occurred in the game world when it became real, things he was already starting to forget after thirty long years.

"Several times. Is there anything wrong with it?"

"With this kind of reaction, looks like you aren't aware of it yet..."

As he concluded, the boy took a fountain pen from the top of his desk and, again, threw it to his friend. Drawing an arc in the air, the object was stopped by Mira's hand and then brought at her eyesight level. Judging from its appearance, it was just a common fountain pen, with nothing special to it. Yet, considering it was something being used by a king, it wouldn't be wrong to think of that pen as a luxury item, evidenced by how finely it had been crafted.

"Soo…?"

"Try putting it inside your Item Box."

Wondering why she had to do it, Mira still did as told. She opened her Item Box and tried to store the pen within it; that, however, did not succeed, and contrary to her expectations, the item fell to the ground.

"Hey, what the hell was that?"

While fixing her eyes on the Item Box, the girl observed what was happening directly below, with the pen rolling on the floor. She had enough space in her box and there wasn't any problem in particular with it. Having no idea about what had just happened, she then directed her gaze to Solomon.

"Remember how a while ago I said that the game system had been managing our money? In truth, looks like even the items themselves were managed by that system."

The boy stood up and picked the fountain pen, opening his own Item Box a moment later.

"When this world was still game, fountain and quill pens were categorized as miscellaneous items, swords and armors were considered armament items, jewels and metals were raw material items and so on, right?"

Explaining, he took out and displayed a certain sword to his friend, one that was even known to her.

"A short while after the game became reality, some players gathered together and created a research center in order to clarify this world's natural laws. There, they conducted a series of investigative experiments, from which they ascertained that during the game period, **items** were things that had been automatically assigned and classified as such by the game system. As a result, like its own name says, the Item Box can only contain things that are categorized as **items**."

As he continued talking, Solomon picked a book from his shelf and held it so Mira could see it.

"Since the game system isn't working now, the fountain pen isn't a 'miscellaneous item' and this book isn't a 'book item'. In other words, they can't be placed inside the Item Box. Oh, by the way, the items that are inside your box have already been categorized, so they should be fine."

Solomon then finished by returning to his Item Box the sword he had taken out beforehand.

"This is pretty inconvenient. In the end, does that mean I will have to travel with my hands full of luggage?"

The girl heavily lamented upon hearing all that news. Every single one of the individuals she was supposed to find were problematic people, so the amount of goods necessary for that harsh journey would obviously be huge.

"But you know, half a year after the Item Box became unusable, a revolutionary technique was developed."

"Oho… tell me more about it."

Seemingly putting on airs as he said that, Solomon was urged by Mira's gaze to continue.

"Basically, you should manually perform what was once done automatically by the system. With that in mind, the end result of the research was the development of【Abstractionism：Itemization】. After using this ability on an item, it can be assigned in all kinds of item categories and, thus, become able to be stored in the Item Box."

"So to sum it up: with that ability, it will be possible to continue using the box as if nothing has changed, am I right?"

"Exactly. Since it's pretty easy to do it, I'll teach you the skill."

"Okay, thank you."

After taking a document from his bookshelf, the King brought it to the table in front of Mira and unfolded it. Written there—in a very detailed way—was the process required to obtain that new ability, so the young girl promptly began studying it.

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Thirty minutes later, having learned the Itemization skill without any problems, Mira applied it to the fountain pen and nodded, satisfied, after confirming that it actually went inside her Item Box. Then, after successfully trying the basics of itemization, Mira returned to the sofa to take a breather.

"Now, going back to the Underground Graveyard matter. Differently than before, all dungeons are now managed by the General Adventurer's Union."

Solomon finally broke his silence and began talking about his friend's requested mission.

"General Adventurer's Union? What is that?"

While taking out from her Item Box the various things she had stored when playing with the new skill, Mira listened to what the boy said and asked for an explanation.

"It's an organization that was created after the game world became real. Its main purpose is to prevent the general populace and the powerless from recklessly entering a dungeon and losing their lives."

"Oho… so it was that… but I am not really buying that main purpose. What if they just wanted to keep a monopoly on the dungeons' treasures or something?"

"You see, there was a certain incident that happened long ago… and one child died."

"Humm, I see..."

Noticing how Solomon slightly dropped the tone of his voice, for some reason the girl felt inclined to agree to his point.

“Dungeon” was a term applied to all kinds of fields that, rather than occupying an area outdoors, existed within an enclosed space. Riches and hidden treasures laid in wait inside the dungeons, but because those places were rife with far stronger wildlife and monsters than the ones in outside fields, they were considered to be very dangerous locations. Nonetheless, the dungeons still had a certain and great fascinating nature, so it wasn’t uncommon for people with the most diverse intentions to enter such hazardous areas—only to never see the light of day again, falling into the darkness of death. Obviously, that had not been considered a problem by the players during the game era, but now that everything became real, they couldn’t ignore an incident that happened there.

A child had set foot inside a dungeon. Their intention was to pick a flower, that served as an ingredient for a special medicine, and, thus, help their sick mother. As the night fell, however, the kid still hadn’t come back, so all the adults mobilized a large search party. In the end, just a little further inside the dungeon, the child’s corpse was found: its mangled, half-eaten and scattered state making it unrecognizable from a human’s body. Then, when the mother heard that one of their hands had been clutching a lone flower, she couldn’t endure it and passed away moments later, as if chasing after her child.

The game world became real. For the NPCs that had already been “living” there since the game period, it meant that now they were genuine living beings and, as such, were able to feel emotions like any other person; as a result, the death of a kid was accompanied by many kinds of sentiments that emerged within them.

When a certain player heard about the incident, they built an organization to manage the dungeons, so that such a tragedy would never happen again. And that was the General Adventurer’s Union.

There were those who had the intention of entering a dungeon. Others wanted the raw materials that existed there and wondered how they could obtain those items. After listening to all sorts of requests coming from individuals like the ones exemplified, the Organization did not stop at just managing the dungeons, but also started acting as an intermediary between the people making those requests and the people strong enough to fulfill them.

Little by little, the Organization grew larger, and many countries allowed the establishment of branches in their own territories, albeit with the following conditions: the Union wasn’t authorized to take part in any disputes between nations and it was also required to cooperate with operations, performed by a country, to exterminate monsters.

“Well, that’s why you’re going, of course, to the Experts’ Union. Here is your letter of recommendation.”

Walking up towards Mira with an envelope in hand, a smiling Solomon presented it to her.

“Oh, so I just need this to enter?”

While receiving the letter, the girl briefly gazed at its front and back, then promptly used Itemization to throw the envelope inside her Item Box. There,

the letter of recommendation had been classified as a “document item”.

“No no, that’s simply a recommendation letter. Only the adventurers affiliated with the Union can enter a dungeon. In addition, every dungeon has its own difficulty ranking, with the Underground Graveyard requiring a C rank or higher, I believe. Now, a ‘rank’ is something you earn at the Union and, as you fulfill the many requests issued there, you’ll be recognized by your ability, receiving a suitable increase in your personal rank. It will be easier to understand if you think of that as an Adventurer’s Guild of sorts. Obviously, that kind of staple system didn’t exist in the game world, but thinking about it now, I wonder why it hadn’t been implemented… strange, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. So anyway, after raising my rank, I should be able to take higher difficulty quests, right? I enjoyed games with this gimmick too.”

Even if it wasn’t something big, the moment Mira heard about that game-like element in the new world, her excitement began, slowly but surely, to rise up.

“That letter of recommendation is something that will guarantee your identity and true strength. Originally, a newly registered individual will start with the G rank, but what I just gave you will instantly get you to the C rank. Speaking of which, the rules of the Union can’t really be bent that easily, so even as the king of a country this is the most I can do for you.”

“I understand. But it should be sufficient enough.”

Having finished putting her Item Box in order, the girl expressed her comprehension while also quietly leaving various objects at the edge of the table—things she had used during her experiments with Itemization.

“Incidentally, you need to know that there are two entry points in the Organization: the Warriors’ Union and the Experts’ Union. As you can probably guess from their names, the details for the jobs offered in each of them are different.”

“Hmm. So, does that ‘Union’ or whatever have a branch in this city? I must make my registration there without delay then.”

“Yeah, there is. Or rather, they exist in almost every city. Well, since you’re already going by carriage to the Underground Graveyard, there’s also one branch in the town near that dungeon. But are you really fine with doing it here? It takes a whole day for them to issue an Adventurer License, you see.”

Said Solomon, the smile on his face laden with some hidden meaning. Upon seeing that expression, Mira felt a slight sense of unease.

“Oh, is that so? Then I will spend one more night...”

That was the exact moment when her memories from the disaster in the morning resurfaced. If the girl were to grant the maids an entire day with her in the castle, she couldn’t even begin to imagine what kind of masterpiece work they would come up with. Now understanding what her friend meant, Mira started pondering her options.

She could spend the night in one of the city’s inns. However, the chances of

her being captured by the maids, when returning to the castle in order to ride the carriage, were high. Even having the vehicle wait for her outside of the town was also out of the question, considering a maid could be waiting for her there. Then, taking into account all of her worries, Mira determined that it would be, without a doubt, completely fatal to prolong her stay by one day; as a result, she strengthened her resolve to immediately depart towards the Underground Graveyard.

"Please, prepare the carriage right now."

"Huhuhu. Everything's already ready, you can leave whenever you feel like it."

As Mira stood up with intense vigor, she left the Office alongside Solomon. Then, accompanied by Lily, all three arrived at the castle's stables. What Mira found there was a two-horse carriage waiting for her, its proportions about one size bigger than the vehicle that, just the other day, had brought her from the tower. Standing by the carriage's side were two people: a maid, holding a large basket and a bag in her hands, and the one working as the coachman, Garrett.

"How should I put it… we meet really often, Garrett..."

Remembering the military man's figure while he grasped the steering wheel of the Armored Jeep, the girl's expression stiffened.

"Good morning, Mira-sama. It might not be on the same level as the Armored Jeep, but this vehicle here is also another wonderful piece of work! I am deeply touched by having the opportunity of being its driver."

Garrett bowed and, with his arms spread, introduced that seemingly commonplace carriage, an inebriated-like smile on his face.

"I just do not care anymore about the kind of carriage we are going to use. But please, at least drive responsibly."

She had requested that from the bottom of her heart, to which Garrett replied with, "But of course," his previous smile changing to a greatly refreshing one.

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"Well then, take care."

"Yeah."

After briefly exchanging farewells with Solomon and then being tightly hugged by Lily, Mira finally boarded the carriage. When she was already inside, the other maid brought the bag and the basket for the girl.

"Please be careful and have a safe trip, Mira-sama. Inside the basket, there is a meal we have arranged so you can eat along the way. In addition, there is a change of clothes prepared for you within this bag."

"O-Okay… I see. Thank you..."

With a bow, the maid stepped off from the vehicle. Staring at the bag whose contents she couldn't begin to imagine—or rather, she didn't even want to imagine them—Mira sighed; it was still in the morning and she had already lost count on how many times that kind of reflex had left her lips. Then, moments later, when the vehicle slowly broke into a run, Mira felt greatly relieved and took a sip from an Apple au Lait she had previously retrieved from her box.

Outside of the window, the passing scenery gently gained speed. It was easy to notice that, when compared with the old days, the townscape that could be seen from there had undergone through a complete change. While vacantly gazing at such an unfamiliar sight, Mira concentrated on the sweetness that was spreading within her mouth.

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Seeing his friend off, Solomon began moving in a hurry. From his own experiences, the unsettling behavior of the Lesser Demons, who hid themselves in the many groups of monsters that invaded the country, was something that, if left unattended, would bring too many worries for him. On top of that, there was their main destinations: the flower gardens decorated with a white pillar each. To the players, those places were known for possessing harvesting spots for a peculiar kind of medicinal herb, called "Angel's Drop"—and it was just that, no more, no less.

However, because of what had just happened, there was now the possibility of something else existing and being concealed in those locations. *Organize an investigative team and collect data related to the Lesser Demon*. As Solomon quickly gave out those orders, he faced the direction in which Mira's carriage had gone and, looking up at the sky, smiled.

Postface

Ryuusen Hirotsugu
Currently at the height of his chuunibyou.
Since he is already in terminal stage, he was told by the fairy doctor that a complete recovery would be impossible.
However, he will continue to cheerfully live with all his might.
Even if the author disappears from this world, he would feel really happy if he's remembered by everyone else.

Fuzichoco
Born in the Chiba Prefecture, she is an illustrator living in Tokyo.
Draws for many different things, while focusing on illustrations for books and card games.

Her main diet is chocolate.

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Notes

[←1]
Virtual Reality Massively Multiplayer Online RolePlaying Game

[←2]

Dunbalf/Mira talks like a cliche'd old man from manga/anime/etc.

[←3]

"Mira" or "ミラ" comes from "ミラー" (literally the English word 'Mirror'); Kagami's name, "鏡", means Mirror in Japanese.

[←4]

The dialogue here was a bit tricky to get the right meaning translated into English. Basically, Mira said “厠” or “Kawaya” (Toilet), but Garrett understood it as “カワ屋” or “Kawaya/Kawa-ya”, roughly meaning “(Fried chiken) skin shop”. That kind of food is usually sold in Japan, but it’s not THAT common for a shop to be named after it. In the end, Garrett simply thought that Mira wanted to eat in that kind of restaurant.

[←5]
See Evangelion

[←6]
バカナリア – “Bakanaria,” a pun with “Luminaria” and “Baka”

[←7]

“Yoi de wa nai ka~ Yoi de wa nai ka” (lit. “Isn’t it fine~ Isn’t it fine~): those lines are commonly used (in dramas, anime, manga) by “evil politicians of the Edo period” when they lay their hands on a helpless girl and try to rape her. Something like, “don’t worry, it will all be fine”

Japan Self-Defense Forces

[←9]

Type 10 battle tank used by JSDF, entered service in 2012

Lightning Scaled Tiger

[←11]

Carat – Unit of 0.2 grams used for gemstones and the like. A flawless diamond must have at least 100 carats.

[←12]

“それで至高の。。。いや、嗜好の存在へと辿り着ける” – There’s a play on words here. 至高 (Supreme) is written with the same kana/sound as 嗜好 (Tastes, preferences): “Shikou”. So the narration would be saying that, rather than being able to reach the “Supreme Being” it would be the “Embodiment/Personification of (her) Tastes/Preferences.”

[←13]

霊症 – Literally, ‘Spirit/Soul Illness’, a term used when something from an “etheric plane” or “an invisible world” affects badly the soul. Not to be confused with “diseases from the mind”.

[←14]

Hitodama (small-looking fiery balls representing souls)

[←15]

鬼が出るか蛇が出るか – Literally “Will a devil (oni) come out or will it be a snake?”, it’s an expression used when there are two things that could happen, both bad, but one is worse than the other.

[←16]

特撮映画の怪獣大決戦 – The “decisive battle” against the monster (Kaijuu) in a Tokusatsu movie.

[←17]

頭隠して尻隠さず – Literally, “Hiding your head without hiding your ass”

[←18]

She asks Mira to do a “Banzai!”. The classic scene can be seen in the second episode of KanColle, with Atago and Fubuki.